

Treating breast cancer with radiotherapy



Your doctor has recommended radiotherapy to treat breast cancer. Here is some information about this treatment and the precautions to take to make sure everything goes as well as possible.

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is a treatment that uses radiation, that is, high-energy X-rays, to destroy cancer cells in the affected area and keep them from reproducing and growing. Radiation affects cancer cells **AND** normal body cells. While cancer cells are permanently destroyed, most of the normal cells recover on their own.

Then the technologist will mark your skin with small tattoo dots that will serve as guides. These dots are permanent. They will not fade after the treatment.

Tattoo markings are used because they help make the treatment more precise, optimal, and safe. If you have any concerns about tattoos, talk to your doctor. He or she can suggest a possible alternative.

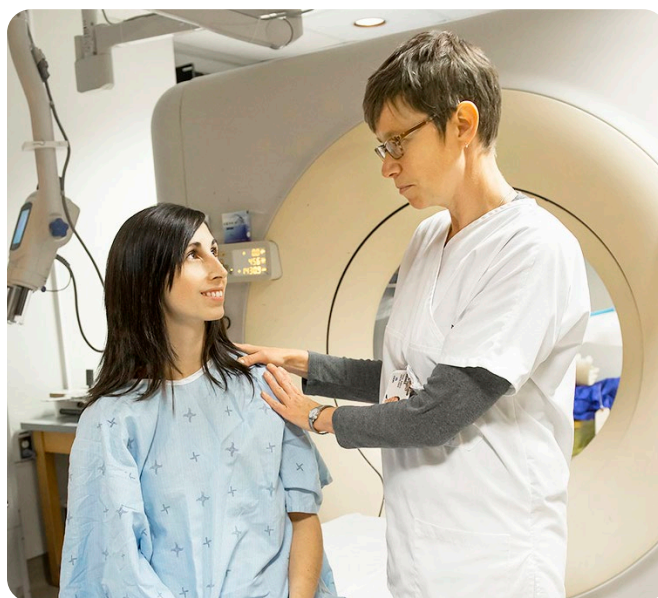
What happens in the first visits?

The first visits are to prepare you for the treatment and then begin it.

1st visit: planning scan (CT scan)

At your first visit, the medical team will examine the inside of your body using an imaging machine, the scanner. This exam is called computed tomography, or CT scan. The CT scan allows them to define very precisely the area of your body that will be treated and to avoid areas that are not sick. This is called the “treatment plan”.

You will lie on your back on a special mattress that takes the shape of your body. Your arms are placed above your head. A technologist determines the exact position you should be in during all treatments. If necessary, he or she will give you props to help you keep the position.



Patient about to have a scan.

2nd visit: verification and first treatment

First, technologists will meet with you to go over the steps of the treatment. Don't hesitate to ask them your questions.

In this second visit, they will make sure the area to be treated matches the treatment plan. You will get into the position that you are supposed to be in during the treatments. The props used during your planning scan will help you stay in place. The technologists might add a few markings to make the set-up easier and to check your position.

Then you might have your first treatment immediately.

We advise you to wear old dark clothes for the first visits, as the ink used can stain fabrics.

What happens in the treatments?

At each session, the technologists make sure everything is working well from a technical standpoint. After checking that you are in the correct position, they leave the room. But an intercom and cameras keep you in touch with them. They see you, they hear you, and you can talk to them.

After treatment, a technologist will give you the date and time of the next treatment.



Radiotherapy session.

How long do the treatments take?

Each session lasts about 20 minutes. You will receive between 16 and 30 treatments. The total number will be determined in advance by your doctor. In most cases, the treatments are given every day from Monday to Friday. Over the course of your treatments you will see your doctor regularly.

Will I feel any pain?

During the treatments, you will not feel any contact or pain. However, side effects may occur during or after the treatments.

What are the possible side effects?

You may experience the following side effects:

- Mild fatigue
- Slight redness of the skin in the treated area

Talk with your doctor or health care professional about other possible side effects, such as lymphedema (swelling of the arm caused by a build-up of fluid).

How should I prepare BEFORE the treatment?

- During the treatment, your arms will be held above your head. Because of this, exercises to improve your flexibility are recommended to make the position more comfortable. Ask your clinical practitioner for the fact sheet on exercises to do before radiotherapy for breast surgery patients.
- Eat a healthy diet based on *Canada's Food Guide*.
- It is recommended to stop smoking and drinking alcoholic beverages.

How do I take care of myself DURING the treatments?

- > Continue to eat a healthy diet as recommended by *Canada's Food Guide*. Don't take any antioxidant supplements or natural health products without first talking with your doctor. If you have difficulty swallowing, choose softer, milder foods to make it easier. Avoid irritating foods (lemon, grapefruit, orange, tomato, very spicy foods).
- > Take care of your skin

- Wash the areas treated with radiation using a mild, unscented soap that has a neutral pH and no lanolin.
- Rinse your skin and sponge it gently to dry it without rubbing.
- If necessary, your doctor may prescribe a cream to use during the treatment period.



Do not use any product on treated skin without first talking with your doctor.



- > Do not erase the marks that the team has made on your skin.

- > If you are fertile, use contraception for the duration of treatment and up to 6 months after stopping treatment. Do not take oral contraceptives or use an IUD with progesterone because cancer can be linked to certain hormones. Talk to your doctor; condoms are a good option.
- > Wear loose clothing to reduce irritation of treated areas. Choose cotton or natural fabrics. Wear a roomy bra without wires.



To reduce irritation, wear loose clothing.

- > Cover the treated area to protect it from the sun.
- > Do not apply heat or cold directly to the treated area.
- > Do not take very hot baths or use whirlpools and do not use a sauna.
- > Do not bathe the treated area in chlorinated, salt or lake water.

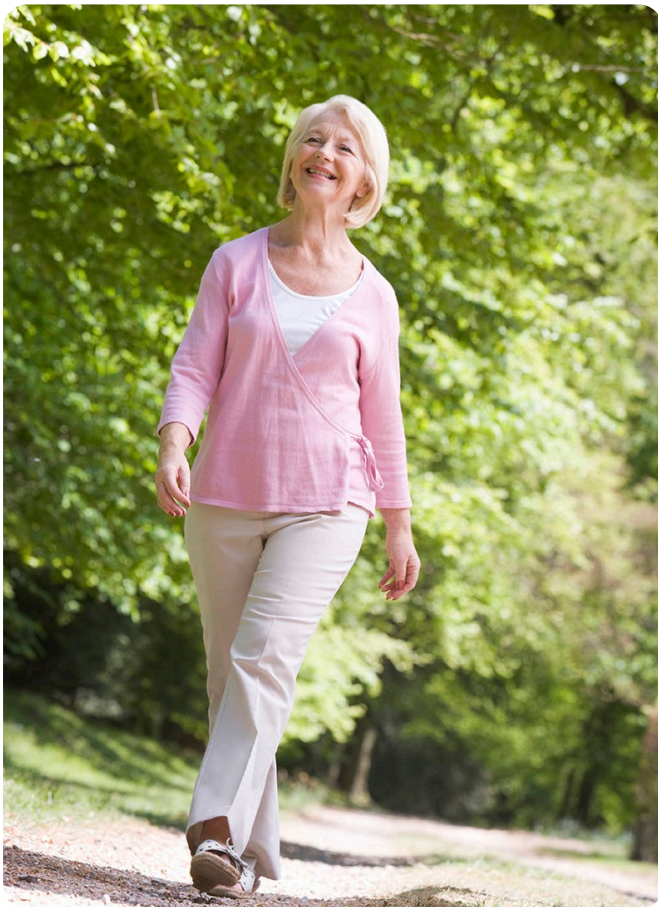
BE ON THE LOOKOUT

Inform the technologists promptly of any changes in your skin: redness or dryness.

What precautions should I take AFTER the treatments?

Side effects may occur, and some may even increase within 10 days after the end of treatment. Here are some tips for your well-being.

- > Don't rub the marks, they will fade on their own.
- > Apply the cream prescribed by your doctor or an unscented moisturizer until the skin is normal again. If any of your skin is oozing (covered with fluid) notify your clinical practitioner.
- > Slowly resume your activities.
- > Continue to eat a healthy diet, as recommended by *Canada's Food Guide*. Also, continue avoiding irritating foods in the weeks following your treatment or discuss this with your doctor.
- > Practice moderate physical activity. For example, walk 30 minutes a day several times a week.



Can I cancel or postpone a treatment?

We strongly recommend that you don't miss any treatment sessions. If you have a significant impediment, you must call the technologists. Their contact information will be given to you at your first visit.

Who should I talk to if I have questions during my treatments?

The technologists are your resource persons. Let them know about your questions, concerns, or anything that makes you uncomfortable. If they can't answer you, they will direct you to the right person.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our website chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante



Questions

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal chumontreal.qc.ca