Your doctor recommends radiation treatment to your breast. This sheet discusses possible side effects and ways to manage them.

Possible Side Effects

Skin changes. The effects of radiation on the skin depend on a number of factors:

- Number of treatments
- Total dose of radiation
- Body part being radiated
- Prior sun exposure of the radiated skin
- Other factors such as overall health

After 10 treatments some people do not notice any change in their skin from the radiation. However, after 30 treatments, all people experience some degree of radiation skin reaction (dryness, redness, peeling, tenderness, itching, or blistering). Radiation skin reactions happen gradually and may last for a while after radiation treatments end. Most effects are temporary and resolve after two to four weeks.

Side effects to the skin occur only in areas where the radiation enters and exits your body. If you are unsure where your treated areas are, ask your health care provider. After a week or two of treatments, your skin will start to become dry. It may darken, turn pink to red, itch, or feel tender. You should take care of your skin from the first day of radiation, before you notice these changes.

Here are some guidelines to help protect your skin:

- Wash skin gently with warm water. Do not scrub. Use your hand rather than a washcloth and pat dry with a soft towel.
- Use a mild soap that is free of perfumes or deodorants.
- Wear loose-fitting cotton clothes. Do not wear tight-fitting clothes that can cause friction.
- Do not use adhesive products such as bandages or tape in the treated area.
- Avoid extreme heat or cold on the skin. Do not use heating pads, ice packs, or hot water bottles on the treated skin.
- Avoid exposing treated skin to the sun; it will be more sensitive. Use a PABA-free sunscreen with at least SPF 30 when outdoors, wear a wide-brimmed hat, and avoid tanning beds.
- Use only an electric razor if you shave within the treated area.

These suggestions can help manage skin reactions:

- Apply a moisturizing cream, lotion, gel, or oil to radiated skin. Choose products for sensitive skin, and avoid products with perfume or deodorant.
- If a product stings, stop using it.
- If your skin becomes tender or itchy, try using an over-the-counter, one-percent hydrocortisone cream. If necessary, your health care provider may prescribe a steroid cream.

Hair loss. After about two weeks, you will lose hair in the treatment area. This may not be permanent. It depends on the dose of radiation you receive. Hair usually begins to grow back within three to six months after you complete radiation.

Swelling of the breast. You may notice a harmless swelling of the breast after a few treatments. The swelling usually does not cause discomfort. It may take several months to go away.

Sore throat and difficulty swallowing. Sometimes the esophagus (the tube that passes food to the stomach) is within the treated area. If this happens, you may develop a sore throat. Soft foods, throat gargles, or certain medicines can provide relief. Talk with your doctor if you have any concerns.

Fatigue. Feeling tired is a common side effect. Mild exercise such as walking may improve energy level. Your level of activity should depend on how you feel. Ask your doctor if you have any questions or concerns.

Symptoms may go on after your last treatment. If you have any problems, please tell your health care provider.