



PATIENT EDUCATION

Cough and shortness of breath during chest radiation

A plain-language guide for patients and families. Bring this to your visit. It does not replace advice from your clinician.

Why we watch breathing closely

Radiation to the chest (lung, breast, esophagus, lymphoma, or spine fields that cross the chest) can irritate airways or, later, lung tissue. A dry cough or a little more shortness of breath on hills can occur. Sudden air hunger, chest pain, or coughing blood is **not** something to wait out at home.

What you may notice

- A tickle cough that is worse at night
- Feeling winded one flight of stairs sooner than last month
- A low-grade fever with cough — needs a call
- Anxiety that makes breathing feel tighter — still worth a check

Everyday care

Sit up to rest. Use the inhalers you already have as prescribed. A humidifier may soothe a dry cough if your team agrees. Do not start steroids, antibiotics, or extra inhalers from an old bottle without asking. Keep your oxygen plan if you have one.

Where CureRays may fit. Call the same day for new or worsening shortness of breath. We will look for infection, clot, heart strain, anemia, or treatment reaction. This handout cannot tell those apart. Confirm every new inhale or pill with your care team.

What treatment usually involves

- Breath-hold or regular-breathing coaching so the tumor stays in the target
- Arm position above the head for some breast or lung plans — tell us if a shoulder cannot do that
- Weekly questions about cough, fever, and walking distance



Practical tips

- **Rest sitting up** if cough is worse lying flat.
- **Smoke and vape.** Stopping helps lungs and healing — ask for quit support without judgment.
- **Walks.** Short, level walks if safe; stop for air hunger.
- **Pulse oximeter.** Share numbers if you have one — they do not replace how you feel.

When to call the clinic — or 911

- **911 / emergency:** sudden severe shortness of breath, chest pain, fainting, or coughing up blood
- Fever with cough, shaking chills, or lips that look dusky
- New swelling of one leg plus breathlessness (possible clot)
- You need more pillows or more oxygen than your baseline

Questions to ask

- Is a dry cough expected this week for my field?
- Do I need a chest image or oxygen check today?
- How do I do the breath-hold (if I have one) when I am anxious?
- Who do I call after hours if I get tight at home?

How to schedule or learn more

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