

RADIOTHERAPY SIDE EFFECTS

This information sheet is for your general information and is not a substitute for medical advice. You should contact your doctor or other healthcare provider with any questions about your health, treatment or care.

Radiotherapy is administered to destroy cancer cells in the area of the body it is aimed at, but the treatment can also affect some of the normal cells nearby, resulting in side effects.

Are side effects the same in everyone?

The side effects of radiation treatment vary from patient to patient. The side effects depend mostly on the radiation dose and the part of your body that is being treated. Before beginning your treatment, your doctor will discuss the side effects you might experience, how long they might last and how serious they might be.

Side effects may be acute or chronic. Acute side effects are referred to as 'early side effects'. They occur soon after the treatment begins and are usually gone within a few weeks of finishing therapy. Chronic side effects might take months or years to develop and are usually permanent.

The most common early side effects of radiation therapy are fatigue (loss of energy and strength), loss of hair in the treatment area and skin changes.

Fortunately, most side effects will go away in time. There are, however, ways to reduce discomfort.

Will side effects limit my activity?

Not necessarily. It will depend on which side effects you have and how severe they are. Many patients are able to work and enjoy their usual leisure activities while they are having radiation therapy. Others find that they need more rest than usual. Try to continue doing the things you enjoy, as long as you don't become too tired.

How do I manage my fatigue?

Fatigue refers to feeling tired physically, mentally and emotionally and often occurs with radiation therapy. Most people start to feel tired after a few weeks of radiation therapy with worsening tiredness as treatment progresses. Fatigue felt during radiation treatment is different from the fatigue of everyday life and it might not be resolved with rest. It can last a long time and compromise your ability to carry out your usual activities. It will usually go away over time after treatment ends.

You can try the following measures to help cope with fatigue:

- Avoid doing too much. Save your energy for doing things that you feel are the most important.
- Try to get more sleep at night.
- Plan your day so that you have time to rest if you need it.
- If approved by your doctor, light exercise such as walking may combat fatigue.
- If you have a fulltime job, you may want to try to continue to work your normal schedule. If a fulltime schedule is difficult keep up, discuss taking time off whilst receiving radiotherapy or working a reduced number of hours with your employer.
- Get assistance from family members or friends with daily chores.

Please discuss your fatigue with your treating team if:

- your fatigue does not get better, keeps coming back, or gets worse
- you are more tired than usual during or after an activity
- you are feeling tired and it's not related to something you've done
- you experience confusion or cannot focus your thoughts.
- you cannot get out of bed for more than 24 hours.
- your fatigue disrupts your social life or daily routine.

How do I manage any skin changes?

You may notice that the skin surrounding the area that was treated is red, blistered, swollen or irritated. It may look as if it is sunburnt or tanned. After a few weeks your skin may become very dry, flaky or itchy from the therapy.

With some kinds of radiation therapy, treated skin may develop a 'moist reaction', especially in areas where there are skin folds, e.g. in the groin, between the buttocks and under your arms. When this happens, the skin is wet and it may become very sore. It is important to notify your doctor or radiotherapist if your skin develops a moist reaction.

During radiation therapy you will need to be very gentle with the skin in the area that was treated. Here are some suggestions:

- When you wash, only use lukewarm water and no soap; pat dry with a soft towel. Don't scrub your skin.
- Avoid wearing tight, rough-textured or stiff clothing over the area.
- Avoid using heat or cold therapy such as heat pads, ice packs and heat lamps on the treatment area.
- Do not rub, scrub or scratch the skin in the area that was treated.
- Do not use any powders, creams, perfumes, deodorants, body oils, ointments, lotions or home remedies in the area that was treated while you are being treated and for several weeks afterwards.
- Protect the treated area from the sun by using dark-coloured or UV-protective clothing before going outside.

The majority of skin reactions to radiation therapy go away a few weeks after treatment has been completed. In some cases, however, the treated skin will remain slightly darker than it was before and it may continue to be more sensitive to sun exposure.

What can be done about hair loss?

Radiation therapy can cause hair thinning or hair loss, but only in the area being treated. If you are receiving treatment to your hip, you will not lose hair from your scalp. Radiation of your head may cause you to lose hair in this area. Many patients find that their hair grows back again after the treatment is finished. You may notice that your hair has a slightly different texture or colour when it grows back.

Although your scalp may be tender after you have lost your hair, you can cover your head with a hat, turban or scarf. You should wear a protective cap or scarf when you are in the sun. If you plan to buy a wig, it is a good idea to select it early in your treatment if you want to match the colour and style to your own hair. It is also important to make sure the lining of the wig does not irritate your scalp.

You may experience other side effects dependent on the area of treatment. Be sure to tell your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist about any side effects that you notice. They can help you treat the problems and tell you how to lessen the chances that the side effects will come back.

References

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3. CANCERCARE (formerly GVI Oncology). Website. <http://www.cancercare.co.za><http://www.cancercare.co.za>. South Africa.

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