



How to take care of yourself while receiving radiation therapy

Introduction

Radiation therapy is the use of special X-rays to treat cancer. These X-rays kill cancer cells. But they can also temporarily affect healthy cells. This can cause side effects in the area of the body that is treated. Side effects differ for each person. They depend on the area of the body being treated, the type of radiation used, the dose of radiation and your general health.

Most side effects start after the 2nd week of treatment. They may slowly progress during and up to 2 weeks after the end of treatment before starting to get better.

This information is to help you to know what side effects you may have. It will also tell you what to do to help reduce or manage side effects.

Your doctor will follow up with you every week or every other week while you are receiving radiation therapy. Your technologist will give you your treatment every day. You can also ask to speak with a nurse. Ask any member of the team (doctor, technologist or nurse) if you have any questions.

What side effects can I expect?

(1) Skin reactions

When radiation is given, it passes through the skin to reach the area being treated. Skin reactions are a common side effect of radiation therapy. The skin might become red or darker in color, dry, itchy, or even peel or weep (look wet).

How should I care for my skin during radiation treatment to help prevent skin reactions?

1) Keep your skin clean.

- a. Take quick showers or baths. If you take a bath, rinse with clean water after.
- b. Use lukewarm water.
- c. Use mild **unscented** soap.
 - For example: Dove®, Cetaphil®, Aveeno® or CeraVe® unscented soap bar.
- d. For the skin in the area being treated:
 - i. Wash gently with the palm of your hand.
 - ii. **Do not remove your skin markings.**
 - iii. Rinse well.
 - iv. Pat dry with a soft towel.

2) Keep the skin of the area being treated moisturized.

- a. Apply **unscented** cream or lotion **at least twice a day.**
 - Examples: Glaxal base, Cetaphil®, CeraVe®, Lipikar® or Cutibase®.
 - Avoid creams or lotions with any additives like vitamin E.
- b. Always ask your doctor, technologist or nurse before using another cream or lotion.
- c. **Do not remove your skin markings.**

3) Protect your skin.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Protect the treated skin from the sun by covering with clothes.✓ Wear loose-fitting clothes with soft, natural fibers such as cotton.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✗ Do not rub, scrub or scratch the skin being treated.✗ Do not use tape on skin being treated.✗ Do not use talc, cornstarch or baby powder.✗ Do not apply anything hot or cold to the skin being treated. This means not using heating pads, ice packs or hot tubs. You also should not take hot baths or showers.✗ Do not swim. It can irritate your skin and erase the markings.

What do I do if I get a skin reaction?

- If you feel your skin is irritated or itchy:
 - Tell your technologist.
 - **Use your moisturizer more often.**
 - You can also wet a soft towel with cool water and put it on the skin for 5 minutes, four times a day.
- If the skin feels very irritated, or begins to peel or weep:
 - Tell your doctor, technologist or nurse.
 - You may receive a prescription for another type of skin cream.

(2) Fatigue

- Fatigue, or feeling tired, is another common side effect of radiation therapy.
- It is different than normal feelings of tiredness. It does not get better just by resting.
- What can I do if I have fatigue?
 - Try to remain as active as possible. This is the best way to fight fatigue. Walking is a good example of a way to stay active.
 - However, listen to your body. You may have to reduce your activities and rest sometimes.
 - If you need to nap, limit this to 30 minutes, early in the afternoon. Long naps can make it hard to sleep at night.

(3) Loss of appetite

- You may feel less hungry when receiving radiation therapy.
- It is important to not lose weight. Your body needs nutrition for healing.
- How can I maintain my weight?
 - Do not skip meals.
 - If you eat smaller amounts, try to eat more often.
 - Have protein at every meal and snack.
- It is also important to stay well hydrated. Drink plenty of water every day.

What can I do if I feel overwhelmed?

It is normal to feel many different emotions as you start a new cancer treatment. You can feel worried, angry, sad, numb or okay. These feelings can change over time.

What can I do to help myself?

- Talk with someone you trust.
- Talk with your doctor, technologist or nurse.
- Take part in the Cedars CanSupport virtual support programs.
 - For information, call (514) 934-1934 ext. 35297 or email cedarscansupport@muhc.mcgill.ca
- If these feelings make it hard to get through your day or to sleep at night, or if you feel very alone, tell your doctor, technologist or nurse. If needed, you can be referred to a social worker or the Psychosocial Oncology Program for help.

Where can I get more information?

If you want more information, the internet can be a way to get it. However, not all information found on the internet is accurate. You can visit these reliable websites:

cancer.ca — Canadian Cancer Society

fqc.qc.ca — Quebec Cancer Foundation

cansupport.ca/cancer-online-information — Cedars CanSupport, information by topic

cancer.net — American Society of Clinical Oncology

cancer.gov — National Cancer Institute

You can also contact the Cedars CanSupport Resource Centre by phone at 514-934-1934 ext. 31666 or by email at cedarscansupport@muhc.mcgill.ca.

What should I do if I feel very sick or if there is an emergency?

If you have an urgent issue that is causing you to worry in between hospital visits:

- Weekdays from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM:
 - Call 514-934-1934 ext. 43400 to talk with a nurse
- Evenings from 4:00 PM to 8:00 PM and weekends or holidays from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM:
 - Call 514-934-1934
 - Listen to the options and press the number for the operator
 - Ask for the radiation oncology resident on call

If your symptoms are very severe or you are unable to reach someone, go to the emergency department of the nearest hospital. Tell the doctor that you are receiving radiation therapy.

IMPORTANT: PLEASE READ

Information provided is for educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice or instructions of a professional healthcare practitioner or to substitute for medical care. Contact a qualified healthcare practitioner if you have any questions concerning your care.

© July 8, 2022, McGill University Health Centre

Document developed by the Department of Radiation Oncology, with support from the Patient Education Committee and the MUHC Libraries.