



Patient information

**Radiation therapy
to the cervical spine**



This brochure is designed to inform you and your family/carers about radiation therapy. It aims to give you some idea of what to expect during and after your treatment, and we hope to relieve any concerns you may have.

It does not replace discussion with the health professionals involved in your care, and we encourage you to raise questions and concerns.

Our experienced staff members are available to assist you. Please do not hesitate to ask for advice.

Radiation therapy is the use of radiation to destroy cancer cells

It works because cancer cells are more sensitive to radiation than normal cells. When a small dose of radiation is given each day over several weeks, normal cells can recover from radiation but cancer cells cannot.

Radiation therapy can be used with the aim to cure a cancer or it may be given with the aim to relieve symptoms.



What are the possible side effects?

Skin reaction

After two or three weeks of treatment your skin may become red, itchy and irritated. This reaction normally lasts through the rest of your treatment and usually settles two to four weeks after treatment has finished.

Fatigue

You may become increasingly tired as you progress toward the end of your treatment. This is a normal reaction to the radiotherapy and each person is affected to varying degrees. Finding a balance between rest and activity will help you cope with this side effect.

Pain and discomfort

The nursing staff will give you information about pain control and your doctor will write prescriptions if required. It is important that you follow the pain control instructions, as this will ensure that you are comfortable and best equipped to complete the radiation treatment.

Pain flare

Radiation therapy to 'bone areas' can cause a temporary increase in pain in the area being treated; it usually lasts 12 -36 hours. Nurses will discuss the use of additional 'breakthrough' analgesia and your doctor will write prescriptions if required.

Difficulty swallowing

Difficulty swallowing is a common reaction when the throat is in the treatment area. As a result of inflammation, the throat may feel painful when swallowing or produce a sensation like a 'lump in the throat'. Early assessment by your doctor and nursing staff can assist in alleviating your discomfort.

Dietary changes may be required. Nurses will discuss with you in detail any changes that are necessary. These may include soft moist food, avoiding salty/spicy foods and alcohol consumption. Dietary supplements such as Ensure/Sustagen may be recommended.

Your radiation oncologist will discuss any possible long term side effects with you related specifically to your individual treatment.



How can I manage my skin during treatment?

Moisturise twice a day

You will be recommended a skin moisturiser to use during treatment. At the start of treatment, apply cream to the area being treated TWICE A DAY. As treatment progresses you may need to apply the cream three to four times per day. If changes to your skin occur in the treatment area, inform the nursing staff as you may need to use a different cream.

Wear loose fitting clothing

Avoid wearing tight fitting clothing that could potentially rub or irritate the skin.

Avoid excessive temperatures

Avoid exposure of the treatment area to excessive temperatures, such as: direct sunlight, heat packs, ice packs, electric blankets, saunas or hot spas.

Wash with warm water and pat dry

You may wash the skin that is being treated with warm water and a mild non-perfumed soap. Pat the skin dry – do not rub.

Do not shave or use cosmetics, lotions, deodorants or perfumes around the area being treated.

Common questions

- **How will radiation therapy affect my daily living?**
You may continue your usual work and activities but you may experience some tiredness near the end of your course of treatment and in the weeks following. Unless otherwise advised you may eat and drink normally, alcohol consumption in moderation is permitted and you can continue to take any prescribed medications.
- **What happens after my treatment is finished?**
Your follow up arrangements will be discussed and organised by your treating team prior to completing treatment.
- **When do the side effects settle?**
The treatment keeps on working even though you have stopped coming in for treatment. Therefore the symptoms may get a little worse before they get better. Generally the side effects will have settled within two to four weeks of finishing your treatment course.





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