



Radiation Therapy to the Head and Neck

This handout offers information on the side-effects you may have from radiation therapy treatments.

For more information on radiation treatment, see the Canadian Cancer Society's booklet on Radiation Treatment: A Guide for People with Cancer. Go to the Canadian Cancer Society's website at cancer.ca and search for the name of the booklet.

After each radiation therapy treatment, it is safe for you to be around other people (including children) and pets. You are not radioactive.

We offer you and your family member/partner-in-care support during your treatments. We also answer any questions you have.

Side effects from radiation treatment to your head and neck

Radiation treatment side effects are not the same for everyone. The side-effects you have depends on:

- The part of your body treated,
- The type of radiation you are treated with
- The number of treatments you have and your general health.

Side effects may be caused by other treatments you are having. It is important you keep a healthy weight during your treatments. If you are having problems with this, ask to be referred to a dietitian.

The following information is about the side-effects you may have.

Sore/dry mouth

Radiation therapy to your head and neck may cause soreness and dryness inside your mouth.

What you can do to help:

- Brush your teeth, gums and tongue after eating and before bedtime.
- Wear your dentures only when needed.
- Rinse your mouth with a homemade mouth rinse (see recipe on page 2 of this handout) 4 to 5 times a day. Rinse your mouth every 1 to 2 hours while you are awake if it is dry or sore.
- Do not use mouthwashes with alcohol in them. They can dry out your mouth.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250 ml) of fluids every day. Drink even when you don't feel thirsty. This will help you stay hydrated.
- Eat soft foods.
- Add sauces and gravies to dry foods.
- Eat foods and drink fluids that are at room temperature instead of hot or cold.
- Do not eat foods that are spicy or acidic.
- Do not drink fluids that are carbonated or fizzy.
- Suck on sugar free candies or gum to help moisten your mouth.

- Use animal or plant based lip balms with bees-wax, lanolin or cocoa butter. Do not use a petroleum based lip balm.
- Do not smoke or drink alcohol.
- Ask your radiation oncologist if artificial saliva would help you with these symptoms.
- Ask for a referral to see a dietitian.

Recipe for homemade mouth rinse

Mix 1 teaspoon of baking soda, 1 teaspoon of salt and 4 cups (1 Litre) of water into a bottle or jar. Make the mouth rinse fresh every day and keep it at room temperature for a maximum of 24 hours.

For more information, read the “Mouth Care During Cancer Treatment” handout found at cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/assets/CCOMouthCareCancerTreatment.pdf?download=1

Skin symptoms

Radiation therapy to your head and neck area may cause you to have dry, itchy or reddening of the skin in the treatment area. These symptoms are common in areas where there is friction or skin folds. You may have loss of hair in the treatment area.

Caring for your skin in the treatment area

You can:

- Wash your skin gently. Use an unscented soap and lukewarm water. Pat dry.
- Use water-based, lanolin free, and unscented lotions or creams to moisturize your skin.
- Wear soft, loose fitting clothing over areas that are being treated with radiation.
- Use an electric razor and not a disposable shaver to shave any areas within the treatment area.

Do not:

- Do not go swimming if you have any sores or open areas in the treatment area.
- Do not use aftershave or perfume on any area of your skin that is being treated.
- Do not use baby powder or cornstarch on any skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use aloe vera on any skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use a heating pad or ice pack on any skin in the treatment area. Do not sit in a hot tub.
- Do not use adhesive tape or band-aids on the treatment area.
- Do not allow your skin surfaces to rub together or clothing to rub against the skin in the treatment area.
- Do not expose your treatment area to direct sun. Wear a wide brimmed hat and shirts that cover the treatment area and stay in the shade if possible. Do not use sunscreen on your treatment area. After your treatment is finished and your skin has healed (no open areas) you may use sunscreen (SPF 30+).

It is important to let your healthcare team know if you have any signs or symptoms of an infection such as fever, drainage, or odour from a sore or wound on your skin.

No energy/feeling tired

Radiation therapy to your head and neck area may cause you to feel tired. You may find your energy level is low.

What you can do to help:

- Keep your normal sleeping schedule. Wake up at the same time each day.
- A short nap (less than an hour) between 12 pm and 3 pm may give you more energy.
- Reduce your alcohol and caffeine in the afternoon and evening.
- Plan your day with time to rest before and after activities.
- Eat healthy foods. Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250 ml) of fluids every day. This will help you stay hydrated.
- Keep active with about 30 minutes of exercise (example: walking) each day. If 30 minutes is too hard, split it up into shorter 5 to 10 minute sessions.

For more information, read the “How to Manage Your Fatigue” booklet found at cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3991

Symptoms in your esophagus

Radiation therapy to your head and neck area may cause you to have a sore throat. You may also notice you have difficulty when you swallow. You may also feel like you have heartburn.

What you can do to help:

- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250 ml) of fluids each day. Choose fluids with calories like juice, milk, soup and fruit smoothies.
- Reduce the amount of caffeine, alcohol and greasy, spicy or acidic foods you have.
- Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day.
- Eat soft foods such as mashed potatoes, rice, eggs, puddings, soups and stews.
- Eat slowly and chew foods well.
- Add supplements such as Ensure™ or Boost™ to your diet.
- You may take an over the counter antacid such as TUMS to prevent heartburn.
- Your radiation oncologist may prescribe you a medication to help with these symptoms.
- Ask for a referral to see a dietitian.

Ask a member of your healthcare team for the ‘Managing Heartburn/Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)’ handout.

Relationships, body image and intimacy symptoms

Radiation therapy can affect your relationships, body image and intimacy. It may change the way you feel about sex. It is also common to have fears and worries that may affect your relationships with others. This can cause changes in your stress level and emotions.

What you can do to help:

- Talk to any member of your healthcare team about your fears and worries.
- Talk to your family and friends about your fears and worries.
- Ask any member of your healthcare team about community programs that can help support you such as Hearth Place, Canadian Cancer Society, and the Look Good Feel Better Program.
- Keep a daily journal throughout your treatment.

For more information read the “Intimacy and Sex For People With Cancer and Their Partners” booklet found at cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf

Preparing for your treatment

For your first appointment, go to the reception on the B1 level. The clerk will show you how to check in at the computer for the rest of your appointments. This first treatment appointment will be longer than your other treatment appointments. The radiation therapists will check the treatment plan that was made for you. X-ray images will also be taken. These images will be used to check that your treatment matches your treatment plan. This process will be repeated throughout your treatments.

After your treatments are finished

Side effects from your radiation treatments will continue for 4 to 6 weeks after your treatments are finished. Some of the side effects may get worse before they get better. At your last treatment appointment, the radiation therapists review any care you need to continue during this time. Make sure you have a follow up appointment booked with your radiation oncologist.

If you have a problem or concern about a symptom or side effect from your cancer treatment:

1. Call your primary nurse at the cancer centre from Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 4 pm, (except on holidays). Use the phone number your primary nurse gave you.
2. Contact CareChart Digital Health from Monday to Friday, 5 pm to 8:30 am and anytime on weekends and holidays for symptom management support.

Talk to a nurse using one of these options:

- Call the after-hours telephone line at 1-877-681-3057.
- Request a video call by going to carechart.ca.
- Use the CareChart Digital Health App. This App is available to download for iOS or Android devices.

Call 911 or go to the Emergency Department at the hospital closest to you for a medical emergency. Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any information in this handout.

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