

Self-Care After Radiation Therapy



Home care

Radiation therapy is a common cancer treatment. Side effects of radiation depend on the part of the body that's treated and the dose of radiation.

It's important to know that side effects of radiation can be grouped as those that happen during treatment and those that happen months, or even years, later. These might be called short-term and long-term side effects.

- Short-term side effects happen during or soon after treatment. Some may get worse as treatment goes on. Some may not even start until you're well into treatment. Then they may last for several weeks after treatment ends. But these short-term side effects will start getting better over time. Most of these side effects can be treated. And there may be things you and your healthcare team can do to help prevent some of them. Be sure to tell your healthcare team about any changes you notice during radiation.
- Long-term side effects develop months or years after radiation treatment ends. Organs that are near the area that's treated, like the lungs, brain, heart, or bladder, can be damaged by the radiation. Your healthcare team may be able to reduce some long-term side effects with careful planning.

Make sure you discuss all possible short- and long-term side effects with your healthcare team. Know what side effects you can expect based on your treatment plan and if there are ways you can prevent them. Ask what symptoms you should watch for. Know when you should call your healthcare team and how to get help after office hours and on weekends and holidays.

After radiation therapy, follow the instructions you get from your healthcare team, as well as these guidelines when caring for yourself at home:

General care

- Stock up on easy-to-prepare foods.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet with foods high in protein and calories.
- Drink plenty of water and other fluids, unless directed otherwise.
- Ask your healthcare provider before taking any vitamins, herbs, or supplements. Let them know what you're taking or have recently stopped taking.
- Be prepared for hair loss in the area being treated. Sometimes the hair doesn't grow back.
- If your mouth or throat becomes dry or sore, let your healthcare team know. Try sipping cool drinks. Ice chips may also help.
- It's very likely that you'll feel more tired while getting radiation. Rest as needed.

Skin care

- It's normal for the skin over your treatment area to start to look and feel sunburned. It may become dry and extra sensitive. It may itch, swell, blister, or peel.
- Keep your skin dry and clean, but don't scrub or use soap on the treated area. Wash gently with warm water. Pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- Ask your therapy team what type of lotion or cream to use.
- Ask your healthcare provider if it's okay to shave the treated area.

- Avoid sun exposure of the treated area. Ask your therapy team about using a sunscreen. Your skin in the treatment area will be extra sensitive to the sun and must be protected, even after treatment ends. Don't use tanning beds.
- Don't remove ink marks unless your radiation therapist says it's OK. Don't scrub or use soap on the marks when you wash.
- Protect your skin from heat or cold.
- Don't use hot tubs, saunas, heating pads, and ice packs without checking with someone on your treatment team.
- Wear soft, loose clothing to avoid rubbing your skin.
- Don't use tape or sticky bandages on the treated skin.

Care for nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea

- Drink clear liquids. Drink small amounts at a time, but drink more often than usual.
- Take the medicines you were given. If you have a problem with them, talk with your healthcare provider.
- Smaller meals with snacks in between may help. You can always eat more after waiting a little, but if you eat more than your stomach can handle at one time, it may cause problems.
- Eat low-fiber, soft, bland foods.
- Try to not eat foods that are spicy, fried, fatty, or cause gas. Also don't eat foods with a lot of added sugar.

Care for fatigue

- You may slowly feel more and more tired as treatment goes on. This is normal.
- Try to get at least 8 hours of sleep at night.
- Plan rest breaks and short naps throughout your day.
- Try to exercise each day. Even a short walk can help you feel less tired. Exercise can also help you sleep better at night.
- Let others help you. Save your energy to do what's most important. Don't overdo it.

Taking medicines

- If you were prescribed medicines, take them as directed. Be sure you know what each medicine is for, the correct dose, and how to take it. Review your medicine list with your treatment team.
- Before taking over-the-counter medicines, discuss them with your healthcare provider. Some may not be suitable.
- Talk with your healthcare provider before taking any herbal remedies, vitamins, or supplements, including CBD.
- Let your provider know if your medicines aren't working. For instance, you may have to try a few anti-nausea medicines until you find what works best for you.

Call 911

Call 911 if you have any of these:

- Trouble breathing or swallowing
- Chest pain
- Extreme confusion or trouble waking
- Seizures
- Fainting

When to seek medical advice

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of these:

- Sore throat
- White patches in the mouth or throat
- Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, or as directed by your healthcare provider
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea not relieved by your medicines
- New or worse bleeding and bruising
- Worsening skin problems or open areas
- Severe fatigue
- Pain that's getting worse or doesn't get better after taking your pain medicines
- Blood in your stool, or black stool, if you didn't have this before
- You're unable to drink or eat because of mouth sores or nausea
- Cough or hoarseness that doesn't go away
- Painful swelling, warmth, or redness in an arm or leg

Be sure you know how to get reach your medical team at all times. Ask if there is a different number to use after hours or on holidays and weekends.

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