

MANAGING COMMON SIDE EFFECTS DURING RADIATION THERAPY

This sheet is for your information and is not a substitute for medical advice. The specifics of your condition and treatment should be discussed with your oncologist to establish the optimal treatment plan for you as an individual.

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) and skin changes. They can result from radiation to any treatment site on the body, e.g. temporary or permanent hair loss may be a side effect of radiation treatment to the head.

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

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.

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.

What causes fatigue?

Fatigue is the most common symptom reported by cancer patients. The exact cause is not always known. It may occur due to the condition or to its treatment. It may also result from lowered blood count, lack of sleep, pain and poor appetite. Most patients will experience fatigue in some form or another.

Most people begin to feel tired after a few weeks of radiation therapy. During radiation therapy, the body uses a lot of energy for healing. You may also be tired because of stress related to your illness, daily trips for treatment and the effects of radiation on normal cells. Feelings of weakness or weariness will go away gradually after your treatment has been completed.

You can help yourself by not trying to do too much. Save your energy for doing the things that you feel are the most important. Try to get more sleep at night and plan your day so that you have time to rest if you need it.

Sometimes, light exercise such as walking may combat fatigue. If you have a full-time job, you may want to try to continue to work your normal schedule. However, some patients prefer to take time off while they're receiving radiation therapy, while others work a reduced number of hours.

Whether you're going to work or not, it's a good idea to ask family members or friends to help with daily chores.

How are skin problems treated?

You may notice that the skin surrounding the area that was treated is red or irritated. It may look as if it is sunburned or tanned. After a few weeks your skin may become very dry 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 region, 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:

- Avoid irritating treated skin.
- When you wash, only use lukewarm water and no soap; pat dry with a soft towel. Don't scrub your skin.
- Do not wear tight clothing over the 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.

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 loss or alopecia, but only in the area being treated. For example, 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, it is a good idea to 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.

Reference

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