

Radiation Therapy to the Abdomen

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

Side effects from radiation treatment to your abdomen

Radiation treatment side effects are not the same for everyone. The side-effects you have depends on: the part of your body being treated, the type of radiation, the number of treatments you have and your general health. Side effects may be caused by other treatments you are having. It is important that 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.

Bowel symptoms

Radiation therapy to your abdomen may cause you may to have more bowel movements than normal for you. Your stool may be loose or watery with or without stomach cramping.

What you can do to help:

- Laxatives and stool softeners may make your diarrhea worse. If you are taking these medications, ask your radiation oncologist or nurse about stopping them.
- Medications such as Metoclopramide or Domperidone may make your diarrhea worse. If you are taking these medications, ask your radiation oncologist or nurse about stopping them.
- Diarrhea can cause you to become dehydrated. It is important to drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of liquid each day. This could include water, juice, soups or sports drinks. Drink an extra cup of liquid for every watery bowel movement you have. Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you are not able to drink 6 to 8 cups (1cup= 250ml) of liquid every day when you have diarrhea.
- Eat small meals of cooked and peeled vegetables/fruits, white bread, lean red meat, fish or chicken throughout the day.
- Reduce the amount of fibre, caffeine, alcohol and greasy, spicy or sugary foods in your diet.
- Do not eat or drink anything with an artificial sweetener in it. Artificial sweeteners may make your gas and diarrhea worse.
- Take an over the counter anti-diarrhea medication recommended by your healthcare team.

For more information, read the "How to Manage Your Diarrhea" booklet found at www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3151

Appetite

Radiation therapy to your abdominal area may cause you to have a loss of appetite while receiving treatment.

What you can do to help:

- Eat small meals more often instead of 2 to 3 big meals.
- Eat convenience foods if you have trouble making meals.
- Eat nutritious snacks such as cheese/crackers, pudding cups, hummus and vegetables and yogurt.
- Choose foods and drinks that are high in protein.
- Add more fat to your food.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1cup = 250ml) of liquid every day. Choose liquids with calories like juice, milk, soup and fruit smoothies.
- Create a relaxing atmosphere during mealtime (example: playing music).
- Light exercise (example: walking) may help increase your appetite.
- Ask for a referral to see a dietitian.

For more information read the “How to Manage Your Loss of Appetite” booklet found at www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3141

Nausea and vomiting

Radiation therapy to your abdominal area may cause nausea (feeling sick to your stomach) or vomiting.

What you can do to help:

- Take dimenhydrinate (example: Gravol) before your treatment to help prevent nausea and vomiting.
- Sip small amounts of liquids often during the day.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of liquid every day. Drink even when you don't feel thirsty. This will help you stay hydrated.
- Drink cool liquids. They may be easier to drink than hot or cold liquids.
- Drink liquids and eat foods at least 30 minutes apart.
- Eat small amounts of food every 2 to 3 hours. Hunger can make feelings of nausea stronger.
- Some patients say that ginger or peppermint make them feel better.
- Ask for a referral to see a dietitian.
- Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you: are not able to keep any water, food or medications in your stomach; have nausea that lasts more than 24 hours or are weak, dizzy or confused.

For more information, read the “How to Manage Your Nausea and Vomiting” booklet found at www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3131

No energy/feeling tired

Radiation therapy treatments may cause you to feel tired. You may find your energy level is low. This may become more of a problem for you as your treatments continue.

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 12pm and 3pm 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 = 250ml) of liquid 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 www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3991

Skin symptoms

During radiation treatment, your skin in the treatment area may look and feel like it is sunburned. You may have skin soreness, itching, blistering and colour changes in the treatment area. In people with light colour or white skin, the skin may appear red. In people with brown or black skin, the skin may appear darker or have a yellow/purple or grey appearance. This area may also feel warm to the touch. The skin changes you experience will depend on the amount of radiation you receive and how sensitive your skin is.

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 your skin in the treatment area.
- Use an electric razor and not a disposable shaver to shave your skin in the treatment area.
- Apply deodorant or antiperspirant to your axilla (arm pits). Do not apply if you have any sores or open areas in your axilla.

Do not:

- Do not go swimming if you have sores or open areas on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use aftershave or perfume on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use baby powder or cornstarch on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use aloe vera on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use a heating pad or ice pack on your skin in the treatment area. Do not sit in a hot tub.
- Do not use adhesive tape or band-aids on your skin in the treatment area.

- Do not allow your skin surfaces to rub together or clothing to rub against your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not expose your skin in the treatment area to direct sun. Wear a wide brimmed hat and shirts that covers your skin in the treatment area. Stay in the shade if possible.
- Do not use sunscreen on your skin in the 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 signs or symptoms of an infection (for example: a fever, drainage, or odour) of a sore or wound on your skin in the treatment area.

Fertility

Radiation treatment to the pelvis may affect your fertility. Your doctor will talk to you about this and give you the information you need. Birth control is recommended during treatment.

Pre-menopausal women may experience menopause following treatment. This means that you will not have periods anymore.

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 <https://www.cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf>

Preparing for your treatment

Go to the main reception on B1 level for your first treatment. The clerk will show you how to check in at the computer for your appointments. Your first day on the treatment unit may take extra time. 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 treatment.

After your treatments are finished

Any side-effects you have from your radiation treatment will continue for 4 to 6 weeks after you are finished. Some side-effects may get worse before they get better. At your last treatment appointment, the radiation therapists will 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, 4 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 of the information in this handout.

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