Radiation Therapy to the Pelvic Area

This handout offers information on how to manage side effects from your radiation therapy treatments to your pelvic area. 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 answer your questions and offer the support needed to you and your care partner during treatments.

Preparing for your treatment

When you arrive for your first treatment appointment, go to the main reception desk on the B1 level. 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.

Side effects from radiation treatments to your pelvic area

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

- The part of your body being treated
- The type of radiation
- The number of treatments you have
- Your general health

You may also have side effects from other cancer treatments you are having.

How to manage your side effects

Bowel symptoms

Radiation therapy to your pelvic area may cause you to have more bowel movements than you usually have. Your stool may be loose or watery with or without stomach cramping.

What you can do to help:

- Laxatives, stool softeners, and 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 = 250 ml) of liquid each day. This includes water, juice, soups or

sports drinks. Drink an extra cup of liquid after every watery bowel movement you have. Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you cannot drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250 ml) of liquid each day when you have diarrhea.
- Eat small meals of cooked and peeled vegetables/fruits, white bread, rice, 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

Bladder symptoms

Radiation therapy to your pelvic area may cause you to:

- Feel pain when you urinate (pee).
- Have difficulty urinating.
- Feel like you are not always emptying your bladder.
- Feel you need to urinate right away.
- Urinate more often, especially at night.

What you can do to help:

- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250 ml) of liquid every day.
- Drink less liquids that have alcohol or caffeine in them.
- Drink less liquids after your evening meal.

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 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

- Wash your skin gently with an unscented soap and lukewarm water. Pat dry with a clean towel.
- 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 if you need to shave your skin in the treatment area.
- Use Anusol or a similar product for irritation of your anal area (if recommended by your radiation oncologist).
- Use a sitz bath as directed by your healthcare team. You will be given Sitz Bath Instructions if this applies to you.
- Do not go swimming if you have any sores or open areas in the treatment area.
- Do not use aftershave or perfume on any skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use baby powder or cornstarch on any area of 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 any skin in the treatment area.
- Do not allow your skin surfaces to rub together or clothing rub against the skin in the treatment area.

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.

Nausea and vomiting

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

What you can do to help:

- Take dimenhydrinate (Gravol) before your treatment to help prevent nausea and vomiting.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250 ml) of liquid every day. Drink even when you do not feel thirsty. Sip on liquids throughout the day to help you stay hydrated.
- Drink cool liquids. They may be easier to drink than hot or cold liquids.
- Eat small amounts of food every 2 to 3 hours. Hunger can make feelings of nausea worse.
- Drink liquids and eat food at least 30 minutes apart.
- Take ginger or peppermint.
- Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you: cannot keep any water, food or medications in your stomach; have nausea that lasts more than 24 hours or are weak, dizzy or confused.
- Ask for a referral to see a dietitian. It is important for you to keep a healthy weight during your treatments.

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 treatment continues.

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 the amount of alcohol and caffeine you have 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

Vaginal symptoms

Radiation therapy to your pelvic area may cause your vagina to feel dry and tight. It can also cause scarring. This scarring can make your vagina narrower and less flexible. This may cause you to have pain with a pelvic exam or with sex. You may notice this side effect more if you have brachytherapy (internal) treatment as well.

What you can do to help:

- Wear cotton underwear and pantyhose with ventilated lining.
- Ask your healthcare team about creams or suppositories that may help with your vaginal dryness.
- Using a water-based lubricant can make sex more comfortable.
- Use a vaginal dilator - a device that you put inside your vagina to keep it open for a period of time. Your healthcare team will give you the information you need about this.

Penile symptoms

Radiation therapy to your pelvis area may cause erectile dysfunction. Erectile dysfunction is when you have difficulty having or keeping a firm erection. This happens when there is less blood flow to your penis, which leads to a less firm erection. Some

cancer treatments can also cause your penis to change in size and shape.

What you can do to help:

- Keep trying to get an erection. Any type of blood flow to the penis is helpful. Keep up with any kind of touching, either by yourself or with your partner.
- Talk to your healthcare team about therapies to help you get an erection. Things like erection pills or vacuum erection devices may help.
- Try having fun with sexual activity that does not focus on intercourse. You may be able climax/orgasm even if your penis is not firm.

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. This can cause changes in your stress level and emotions. It is also common to have fears and worries that may affect your relationships with others.

What you can do to help:

- Talk to your healthcare team about your fears and worries.
- Ask your healthcare team about a referral to a social worker.
- Talk to others about your fears and worries.
- Ask your healthcare team about community programs offering support. This includes: Hearth Place, Canadian Cancer Society, and the Look Good Feel Better Program.
- Keep a daily journal of your fears and worries throughout your treatment.

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

After your treatments are finished

Side effects from your radiation treatments will continue for 4 to 6 weeks after you are finished. Some of the 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. Please talk to any member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any of the information in this handout.

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