Radiation Therapy to the Pelvic Area for Gynecological Cancer

This handout offers information on how to prepare for your radiation therapy treatments to your pelvic area. It also includes information on how to manage side effects from treatment. 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 main reception on the B1 level of the cancer centre. 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 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.

You need to have a **full bladder and empty rectum** for every treatment appointment. We need you to be in the same position every day for treatment. Having a comfortably full bladder and empty rectum can help you stay in the same position. Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have questions or concerns about this.

Having a comfortably full bladder and empty rectum

1. If possible, try to have a bowel movement before coming for your appointment.
2. Empty your bladder 1 hour before your radiation treatment appointment. Drink 2 cups (500ml) of water right after you empty your bladder.
3. If possible, do not empty your bladder again until your treatment is complete. Your bladder should be comfortably full, but not painful.

Side effects from radiation treatment to your pelvic area

Radiation treatment side effects are not the same for everyone. Side effects depend 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 can 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 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 = 250ml) of liquid each day when you have diarrhea.
- Eat small meals of cooked and peeled vegetables/fruits, white rice, 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.
- Ask your healthcare team about an over-the-counter anti-diarrhea medication.

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 = 250ml) 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.

How to care for your skin in the treatment area

- Wash your skin gently using 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 wounds 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 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 any area of 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 a fever and drainage, redness, swelling or odour from a sore or wound on your skin.

Nausea and vomiting

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

What you can do to help:

- Take dimenhydrinate (Gravol) 30 to 60 minutes before your treatment to help prevent nausea and vomiting.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) 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 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.
- Use a water-based lubricant during sex for improved comfort.
- 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.

Fertility

Radiation treatment to the pelvic area may affect your fertility. Your radiation oncologist 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 after treatment. This means 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 can affect your relationship with a partner.

What you can do to help:

- Talk to your healthcare team about your fears and worries.
- Ask your healthcare team for 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, the 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

Some patients need brachytherapy (internal radiation treatment). Your radiation oncologist will let you know if this applies to you.

Side effects from your radiation treatment can continue for 4 to 6 weeks after you finish treatments. 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. 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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