

Radiation Therapy to the Prostate

This handout offers information on 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/ care partner support during your treatments. We will also answer any questions you have.

Preparing for your treatment

For your first appointment, go to the 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 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.

Your prostate is located close to your rectum and bladder. It moves around in this area of your pelvis. Your prostate needs to be in the same position every day for treatment. Having a **comfortably full bladder and an empty rectum** can help your prostate 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

1 hour before your radiation treatment appointment:

1. Empty your bladder.
2. Drink 2 cups of water (1 cup = 250mL)

Your bladder should be comfortably full, but not painful.

Having an empty rectum

Have a bowel movement every day before your treatment appointment (if you can).

Side effects from radiation treatment to your prostate

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 treatment you receive
- The number of treatments you have
- 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 side effects you may have.

Bowel symptoms

Radiation therapy to your prostate may cause you 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 (1 cup = 250ml) 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 fiber, 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 pelvis area may cause you to:

- Feel pain when you urinate (pee).
- Have difficulty urinating.
- Feel like you are not always emptying your bladder.
- Feel an increase in urgency to urinate.
- 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.

Caring for your skin in the treatment area

You can:

- Wash your skin gently. Use 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 areas that are being treated with radiation.
- Use an electric razor and not a disposable shaver to shave any areas within the treatment area.
- Use Anusol or a similar product for irritation of your anal area (if recommended by your radiation oncologist).

Do not:

- Do not go swimming if you have any sores or open areas in the treatment area.
- Do not use aftershave or perfume on any area of your skin that is being treated.
- 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 areas. Do not sit in a hot tub.
- Do not use adhesive tape or band-aids 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.

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 12 pm and 3 pm 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

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 to climax/orgasm even if your penis is not firm.

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

www.cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf

After your treatments are finished

Any side effects you have from 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 any member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any of the information in this handout.

Last reviewed: July 2026