

## Having Radiation Therapy to Manage Your Symptoms

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](http://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.

### Pain

Radiation therapy may cause you to have more pain in the area you are having treated before it gets better.

What you can do to help:

- Take your pain medication regularly as prescribed by your doctor.
- Use a diary to keep track of your medications.
- Talk to your nurse and radiation oncologist about possible changes to your pain medication.
- Do not use hot water bottles, heating pads or ice packs on the treatment area.
- Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have any headaches, earaches or dizziness.

For more information, read the "How to Manage Your Pain" booklet found at [www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3121](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3121)

### 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 areas that are being treated with radiation.
- Use an electric razor and not a disposable shaver to shave any areas within 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.

### **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 fluids 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, exercise for 5 to 10 minutes at a time.

For more information, read the “How to Manage Your Fatigue” booklet found at [www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3991](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3991)

### **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](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf)

**Other side effects will depend on the part of your body being treated. Your healthcare team will talk to you about this.**

### ☐ **Changes in your bowel movements**

If you are having radiation to your pelvis, it may cause you to have more bowel movements. Your stool may be loose or watery and you may have cramping in your stomach.

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 fluids each day. This could include water, juice, soups or sports drinks. Drink an extra cup of fluid 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 of fluids every day when you are having 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](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3151).

## ☐ Nausea and vomiting

If you are having radiation to your pelvis or abdomen, you may have nausea (feel sick to your stomach), loss of your appetite 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 fluids often during the day.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of fluids every day. Drink even when you don't feel thirsty. This will help you stay hydrated.
- Drink cool fluids. They may be easier to drink than hot or cold fluids.
- Drink fluids and eat food 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](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3131)

## ☐ Symptoms in your esophagus

Radiation therapy to your chest area may cause you to have a sore throat. You may have difficulty when you swallow. You may also feel like you have heartburn.

What you can do to help:

- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of fluids each day. Choose fluids with calories like juice, milk, soup and fruit smoothies
- Reduce the amount of caffeine, alcohol and greasy, spicy or acidic foods you have.
- Eat small meals more often instead of 2 to 3 big meals.
- Eat soft foods such as mashed potatoes, rice, eggs, puddings, soups and stews.
- Eat slowly and chew foods well.
- Add supplements such as Ensure, Boost or Carnation Instant Breakfast to your diet.
- You may take an over the counter antacid such as TUMS to prevent heartburn.
- Your doctor may prescribe you a medication to help with these symptoms.
- Ask for a referral to see a dietitian.

Ask a member of your healthcare team for the 'Managing Heartburn/Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)' handout.

## **Preparing for your treatment**

For your first appointment, go to the main reception on 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.

## **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 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](https://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.

Last reviewed: October 2025