

What to Expect When Getting Radiation Therapy for Skin Cancer

Read this pamphlet to learn about:

- Your radiation therapy planning
- Your radiation therapy treatment
- How to manage common side effects from radiation therapy
- What to expect when you finish radiation therapy
- Where to get more information

For more information on Radiation Therapy, please watch our patient education videos at www.whattoexpectrt.theprincessmargaret.ca. These videos offer a step-by-step guide to the radiation therapy treatment process. They explain how radiation works in the body. They also explain how your team works together to deliver the highest quality treatments.



Your radiation therapy team consists of your:

- radiation oncologist (radiation cancer doctor)
- radiation therapists
- radiation oncology nurses
- other health care team members

They will provide you with care, support and information.

If you have any questions, please talk to your radiation therapy team.



Interpretation is available if you speak very little or no English. Please let us know as soon as possible that you need help with interpretation.

Your radiation therapy planning

This appointment will get you ready for your treatment and give us information for your treatment plan. The steps in the planning process will depend on the treatment. The planning could be on treatment Unit 19 or at a CT scanner. Your radiation oncologist will talk with you about the treatment that is right for you.

On the day of your planning appointment, go to Level 1B (one floor below the main floor) of the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre. Check in at the reception desk.

They will take your picture and save it in your file so we can identify you every day for treatment. A radiation therapist will come and meet you in the waiting room to take you to your planning appointment.

You can expect to be here for about 1 hour for this appointment.

Your planning appointment on Treatment Unit 19

- Your radiation therapist will explain what will happen during the appointment. Ask any questions you may have.
- Your radiation oncologist will measure and outline with a marker the area to be treated. Your radiation oncologist may complete this in clinic or on Treatment Unit 19.
- Your radiation therapist will take pictures of the treatment area and your treatment position.
- Your radiation therapist may design a small lead shield to put on and protect the skin around the area to be treated. If the area is close to your eye(s), on your nose, or near your lips, different shields may be used. Your radiation therapist will explain what types of shields you need.
- You may get your first treatment appointment at your clinic visit or at your planning appointment on Unit 19. You can also check your appointment from your myUHN Patient Portal.
- If there are appointments available on Unit 19, you may start your treatment on the same day as your planning appointment. You and your radiation oncologist can decide together what is best.

OR

Your planning appointment at the CT scanner

- Your radiation therapist will explain what will happen during the appointment. Ask any questions you may have.
- You will have a CT scan to map out the treatment area.
- Your radiation therapist may measure the treatment area and put marks on your skin with a marker to map out the area.
- If you need any accessories for treatment, they will be made for you during the CT scan. For example, some patients will need a custom mould.
- After your CT scan, your radiation therapist may put a few tiny permanent tattoos on your skin using a fine needle. They look like tiny freckles. These tattoos will be used during treatment to help get you into the same position each time.

- You may be given a green appointment card with your first radiation treatment appointment or someone will call you a few days later with your appointment date, time and location.

Tip: check your appointment on your myUHN Patient Portal.

Your radiation therapy treatment

Where do I go for my radiation therapy?

Your radiation therapy treatment will be at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre.

Check in at the reception on your treatment floor:

- Treatment Unit 19 is on Level 1B, (one floor below the main floor).
- Treatment Units 1-17 are on Level 2B, (two floors below the main floor).

The staff at the reception desk can help you find your unit and show you how to check in.

What to expect at your radiation therapy appointment

Your radiation therapist will explain the treatment procedure to you first. Ask any questions you may have.

Your radiation therapist will use the information in your treatment plan to:

- Place you into your treatment position.
- Find the treatment area on your body.
- Put on any treatment accessories.
- Set the treatment machine for treatment.
- Deliver the treatment.

For treatments on level 2B, your radiation therapist may also take a Cone Beam CT scan or x-ray images before each treatment to check that you are in the same position every day. The process takes a few minutes. The images are checked and any changes made before you have your radiation treatment.

How long is the appointment?

You should plan to be at the hospital for 30 to 60 minutes each day you have your radiation therapy. Your treatment will take about 30 to 60 minutes on the first day and about 20 minutes on other days.

Will I see the radiation oncologist during my radiation therapy appointment?

You meet with your radiation oncologist and nurse once a week during your course of radiation therapy. They can answer your questions and talk to you about any concerns that you may have. Tell them about any side effects you have.

At your treatment appointment, you can also talk about your side effects with your radiation therapists. If you need help managing your side effects, we may send you to the Radiation Nursing Clinic (RNC). At the RNC, you will see our Radiation Nursing Team.

Radiation Nursing Clinic

Princess Margaret Cancer Centre
Level 2B (behind main reception)

Hours: Monday to Friday,
8:00 am – 5:30 pm

For RNC Clinic, check in with the 2B main reception desk. **You do not need an appointment to be seen at the clinic.**

How to manage side effects from radiation treatment

Some common side effects are listed below. Some of the side effects listed may not apply to you because it will depend on the type of treatment you are getting, and the part of your body that is being treated. If you experience other side effects, tell your radiation oncologist and radiation therapy team.

Skin changes

Skin changes in the treatment area may begin after a few days into treatment and may continue after your last treatment. Your skin may become irritated (warm, red, swollen, dry, tight and itchy).

After a few treatments, your skin may also have dry, flaky patches or moist open areas. It may blister or bleed, especially where two skin folds rub together.

To learn how to care for your skin please read the pamphlet "**Taking care of your skin during radiation therapy.**" It is important to take care of your skin during and after your radiation treatment.

If you have treatment near your eye

You may experience these side effects:

- Irritated, dry, flaking or open areas of the skin in the treatment area
- Dry, itchy, irritated or weepy eye
- Loss of eyelashes

Speak to your radiation oncologist and radiation therapy team for advice on managing these side effects.

The tips below are only if you are having treatment near your eye and experiencing these side effects.

Tips for irritated, dry or open skin near your eye:

- Wash your hands with soap and water before and after skin care.
- Wash your face gently with warm water. Gently pat your skin dry.
- Soak the area with a saline solution. Your radiation nurse can tell you how to do this. You can find a saline recipe in the “Taking care of your skin during treatment” pamphlet.
- If your skin is blistered or open, cover the open areas with a dressing. Speak to your radiation oncologist and visit the RNC for help with dressing and care.

Tips for dry, irritated or weepy eye:

- Wash your hands before and after with soap and water.
- For dry and itchy eyes:
 - Use sterile eye drops (artificial tears) to moisten your eyes. Ask your radiation oncologist and nurse about this. They may also suggest an eye ointment.
- For irritated or weepy eye:
 - You may have extra mucus in the affected eye. Gently clean the mucus from your eye with a cotton-tipped swab and warm water. Do this when you wake up and when needed.
- Do not use anything else in your eyes unless the radiation oncologist has prescribed it to you. Your radiation oncologist may give you a referral to an ophthalmologist (eye specialist). Ask your doctor about this.
- Do not rub or scratch the area.
- Wear sunglasses outdoors.

Loss of eyelashes:

If part of your eyelid is treated, you may lose the eyelashes in that area. Your eyelashes may grow back after your treatment but sometimes this may take weeks or months. Speak to your radiation oncologist and nurse if you have any questions.

Hair loss

The hair growing in the treatment area may fall out and it may not grow back. Speak to your radiation oncologist to learn more about hair loss.

If you get radiation treatment to your nose or lips:

The lining inside your nose and the skin on your lips are very thin and sensitive. If your treatment includes these areas, you may need to care for them a bit differently than other areas of your skin.

The tips below are only if your lips or nose are being treated directly with radiation.

Tips if your lips or lining inside your nose are irritated:

- Use a sterile (germ-free) water-based lubricating gel such as E-Z Lubricating jelly or Surgilube inside your nose or mouth. You can buy them at a pharmacy. Carefully apply the gel gently with a clean cotton swab. Do not use a moisturizing cream inside your nose.
- Try saline soaks to help soothe and clean these areas. Ask your radiation therapist about using products such as Nasa Mist or a Neti Pot for the inside of your nose. Your treatment team can help you find what works best for you.
- **Do not try to force saline past any blockages you have.**

Changes in your mouth

If your mouth is in the treatment area, you may have changes in your mouth. Talk to your radiation team if you have any pain and discomfort in your mouth.

You should gargle with any one of the mouth rinses below. All of these mouth rinses help to soothe, clean and remove thick saliva from the mouth. Choose the one you find the most soothing and easy to use.

Recommended mouth rinses (without medicine)

1. Flat Club Soda

- Open any brand of store-bought Club Soda.
- Leave it open until the soda is “flat” or no longer fizzes. The bubbles should be gone as they can irritate your mouth and throat.

2. Baking soda and water

- Dissolve 1 level teaspoon of baking soda in 2 cups (500 ml) of water.
- Stir until the baking soda is dissolved.

3. Salt and water

- Dissolve 1 level teaspoon of salt in 2 cups (500 ml) of warm water.
- Stir until the salt is dissolved.

How to store and use mouth rinse (without medicine):

- Let the solution cool to room temperature before you use it.
- Store the mouth rinse in a clean, covered container at room temperature.
- Always make a new batch of mouth rinse every 24 hours. Old mouth rinse is less helpful and may have germs.
- Rinse and gargle (but do not swallow) and spit out to soothe your mouth and clear out thick saliva.
- Do not swallow any of the mouth rinses except for the flat club soda. You can swallow a small amount of the flat club soda to clear the back of your throat.
- Use as often as possible (every hour if you can), especially before and after meals.

Will I get tired while on treatment?

Fatigue (feeling very tired) is a common side effect of radiation therapy. The level of fatigue is different with each person. Fatigue can begin early in treatment and increase during treatment. It usually gets better 1 to 2 months after treatment is done. Do your usual activities if you feel well enough to do so.

Do these things if you are feeling fatigue:

- Pace yourself. Take breaks when you need to.
- Ask for help with activities you do every day that make you tired or you find hard to do.
- Pick a relaxing activity. For example, walk or do a light physical activity or hobby. Pick something that you are able to do every day.
- Plan time to rest before and after activities.
- Keep a regular sleep routine.
- Rest during the day as needed.
- Get enough food and fluids.

What to expect when you finish radiation therapy

Near the end of your treatment, we will give you a booklet titled “Questions to Ask Before You Finish Your Radiation Treatment.”

We will give you a follow-up appointment to see your radiation oncologist at your final weekly review appointment. The appointment is usually in a few weeks or months after your treatment is finished.

After your treatment finishes, some of your side effects may continue and get worse before they start to get better. This is normal. Follow our health care team’s instructions until you feel better. Call the hospital once you are finished with your treatment, if you have any questions or concerns.

Where to get more information

Princess Margaret Cancer Centre:
Patient & Family Library on the main floor.
Phone: 416 946 4501 extension 5383
Email: patienteducation@uhn.ca
Website: www.uhn.ca/princessmargaret

Visit the Library for information about treatment and services at Princess Margaret.

Other resources:

Wellspring:
Phone: 416 961 1928 or toll free 1 877 499 9904
Website: www.wellspring.ca

The Canadian Cancer Society:
Phone: 416 488 5400 or toll free 1 800 268 8874
Website: www.cancer.ca

Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) Home and Community Care:
Phone: toll-free 310-2222 you do not need to dial an area code
Website: www.healthcareathome.ca

