

What to Expect When Getting Radiation Therapy to the Pelvis

For patients with gynecological cancer

Read this pamphlet to learn about:

- The main steps in planning radiation treatment
- How to manage common side effects
- What happens when you finish treatment
- 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 also explain how radiation works in the body and how your team works together to deliver the highest quality treatments.



Your radiation therapy team consists of:

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

They will provide you and your family with care, support and information.

If you have any questions, talk to your radiation therapists at your daily treatment appointment. You can also talk to your radiation oncologist or nurse at your weekly review appointment.



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

How do I prepare for the radiation planning appointment?

Before your radiation planning appointment, a nurse or radiation therapist will review the steps you need to follow to make sure your rectum is empty and your bladder is full. This is how you need to prepare for your planning scan and treatment appointments every time. The pamphlet entitled “Preparing for your CT planning scan and radiation treatments” will help you.

If you were not asked to do anything to prepare, you should continue to eat and drink normally. You should continue to take all your medications that your radiation oncologist or other doctors have prescribed.

Do NOT use vaginal tampons during your CT planning appointment or during your radiation treatments.

Where do I go for this appointment?

Please check in at the reception desk on level 1B at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre. We will take your photograph to help us identify you during your treatment.

Expect to be here for about 1 - 2 hours for this appointment.

What to expect at your CT simulation scan appointment

We will use a CT simulator to decide on the area of treatment. A CT simulator is a CT scanner with special computer software that gives us the detailed x-ray images we need to prepare your treatment. Your doctor may also ask you to have an MRI scan to help prepare for your treatment.

The radiation therapists may draw marks on your skin. These marks can wash off, so they will also give you a few small permanent tattoos using a fine needle. The radiation therapist will explain this procedure to you first.

The doctors, physicists and therapists will use the information they gather to develop a plan that is right for you.

Your Radiation Therapy

Where do I go for my radiation therapy?

You will have your radiation therapy on level 2B (2 levels below the main floor) of the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre.

Check in at the reception desk on level 2B when you arrive. The staff there can show you how to check in.

How long is the course of treatment?

Your treatments will take about 20 minutes or less, but you should plan to be at the hospital for 1 hour each day. Most of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position for treatment.

Your first treatment may take longer because your radiation therapists will be checking all the information from your plan before giving you your treatment.

Before treatment, images are taken to check that you are in the correct position for treatment every day.

For your radiation therapy treatment appointments, you must have a comfortably full bladder and empty rectum. Your bladder should be as full as it was during your CT planning scan appointment. Please check the pamphlet you were given.

If you have not been asked to do anything to prepare, you should continue to eat normally. If you are taking medications, continue to take all medications that have been prescribed by your radiation oncologist or other doctors.

How to Manage Common Side Effects from Radiation Therapy

Side effects from radiation are different for everyone. Here are some common side effects and how to manage them.

Will I get tired while on treatment?

Fatigue (feeling very tired) is a common side effect of radiation therapy. This varies with each person but often begins early in treatment. It can increase gradually during treatment, and usually gets better over 1 to 2 months after treatment is over.

Do these things if you are feeling tired:

- Pace yourself, especially with activities that make you feel tired.
- Ask for help with activities you do every day and that you cannot manage.
- Pick a relaxing activity (for example walking) or hobby that you are able to do every day.
- Keep a regular sleep routine at night and rest as you need to during the day.
- Eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of fluids.
- Eat meals at regular times through the day and snacks if you need them.

Will there be changes in my appetite?

Some patients may not feel very hungry while receiving treatment. Chemotherapy and pain medications may also lead to a loss of appetite.

Do these things if your appetite changes:

- Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day, instead of 3 large meals a day
- Eat foods that you enjoy
- Make the food interesting and appealing
- Stock up on foods that are easy to prepare
- Carry a snack with you when you come for treatment in case you are delayed and feel hungry
- Try not to have too much to drink with meals so that you do not fill up on fluids
- Drink plenty of fluids between meals
- Light exercise and fresh air may help your appetite

Please speak with your radiation therapist, oncology nurse or radiation oncologist if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.

Do these things if you have nausea and vomiting:

- Eat 5 to 6 small meals throughout the day.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups of liquid throughout the day such as: water, ginger ale, clear soup, juice.
- Try plain or dry foods such as: toast, crackers, cereal, rice, noodles or boiled potato.
- Do not lie down for at least 30 minutes after eating.
- Eat cold or room temperature foods.
- Take prescribed anti-nausea medication (such as Zofran) before your radiation treatment.

Please speak with your radiation therapist, oncology nurse or radiation oncologist if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.

Will I have cramps and diarrhea?

You may have cramps (stomach ache) in your bowel or start to have diarrhea (watery stool). These side effects can start as early as the first week of treatment.

Do these things if you have cramps (stomach ache) and diarrhea:

- Eat what you normally do until you feel cramping or diarrhea
- Eat foods that are low in fibre
- Eat foods that are low in fat
- Avoid milk products (lactose)
- Avoid caffeine and spices
- Eat 5 or 6 smaller meals instead of 3 larger meals
- Drink 8 to 10 cups of liquids each day to stop dehydration if you have diarrhea
- Medicines such as Imodium may help to control cramps or diarrhea (For more information ask your health care team for these pamphlets: "Eating Hints for People with Diarrhea" and "Guidelines for Managing Gas")

Please speak with your radiation therapist, oncology nurse or radiation oncologist if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.

Will I get frequent and painful urination?

You may have these symptoms because of the radiation therapy or because of a bladder infection:

- You need to urinate often, even at night.
- You have pain or a burning feeling when you urinate and find it harder to start urinating.

Do these things to help with frequent and painful urination:

- Drink plenty of fluids during the day
- Do not drink as much water or fluid starting 1 or 2 hours before you go to bed. This helps you urinate less often at night.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine like tea and cola.

Talk to your radiation oncologist, oncology nurse or radiation therapist if these symptoms continue. There may be some medication you can take to feel better. Your radiation oncologist may also order tests to check for a bladder infection.

What changes to my skin can I expect?

You may have changes to your skin in the treatment area such as the groin and anus area. This is not the most common side effect and will get better if it occurs. If it does occur:

- Your skin may change colour (such as red, brown or black) and feel **irritated** (warm, dry and itchy) after the first 3 weeks of treatment.
- The skin in the area being treated will begin to heal about 2 to 3 weeks after you finish your radiation treatments.
- Take a Sitz bath. Sitz baths may help the skin around the groin area feel better. It may also prevent hemorrhoids from getting worse. Ask your radiation therapists or oncology nurse for the "Sitz Bath" information booklet. You can keep taking Sitz baths for a few weeks after your treatment is finished. It may help soothe your skin.

To learn how to care for your skin please see the pamphlet "Taking care of your skin during radiation therapy."

Will my sexuality be affected?

Cancer and cancer treatment can change your ability to enjoy or have sex. Talk to your radiation oncologist or oncology nurse if you or your partner have any questions.

Will I have other side effects?

If you are also having chemotherapy, you may have a lower blood count. Your health care team may ask you to have regular blood tests if you are having chemotherapy.

The side effects you learn about in this booklet are the most common ones. It is possible that you will have other side effects that were not listed above. Sometimes the tumour and the treatment can cause very similar symptoms. Please tell your radiation therapist, oncology nurse or radiation oncologist if you have any symptoms.

What if I am having trouble managing my side effects from treatment?

If you need help managing a side effect from treatment, you can talk to your radiation oncologist or nurse during your weekly review appointment. You can also talk to your radiation therapist at your treatment appointments and you can visit the Radiation Nursing Clinic (RNC) to manage your pain and symptoms.

Radiation Nursing Clinic (RNC)

Princess Margaret Cancer Centre
Level 2B (behind main reception)
Hours: Monday to Friday,
8:00 am – 5:30 pm

You do not need an appointment to be seen at the nursing clinic.

What to Expect When You Finish Therapy

Near the end of your treatment, we will give you a booklet titled “What to do When Finishing Radiation Therapy.” At your final weekly review appointment you will be given a follow-up appointment to see the doctor a few weeks or months after your treatment is finished.

After treatment finishes, some of your side effects will carry on and may get worse before they start to get better. This is normal. Continue to follow your health care team’s instructions until you feel better.

Call the office of your radiation oncologist once you are finished with your treatment if you have any questions or concerns. You can also call the Triage line at 416 946 2220 if you have questions.

Other things that can happen after radiation therapy

Some patients may need internal radiation treatment right after finishing external radiation treatment. This is called **brachytherapy**. Your radiation oncologist will let you know if you need brachytherapy. They will talk to you about this before your last day of external radiation.

Sometimes radiation treatment to the pelvis can cause the **vagina to narrow**. Your treatment team will let you know what you can do to help reduce the chance that this will happen.

If this happens, you may need to use a vaginal dilator. You should use the dilator for about 6 months, or as recommended by your radiation oncologist. Your brachytherapist will teach you how to use the dilator after your internal radiation treatment is finished.

Where do I get more information?

Please visit the **Princess Margaret Cancer Centre Patient & Family Library** on the main floor for information about treatment and services at the Cancer Centre.

Phone: 416 946 4501 extension 5383

Email: patienteducation@uhn.ca

Website: www.uhn.ca/princessmargaret

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