

# What to Expect When Getting Radiation Therapy for Prostate Cancer

**For patients who are having radiation therapy at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre**

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

Radiation therapy is the use of a high energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. For more information on Radiation Therapy, please watch our [patient education videos](#). These videos talk about:

- a step-by-step guide to the radiation therapy treatment process
- how radiation works in the body
- how your team works together to give high quality treatments



Your radiation therapy team consists of:

- your radiation oncologist (cancer doctor who uses radiation to treat cancer)
- radiation oncology nurses (nurses who care for patients during radiation treatment)
- radiation therapists (the people who give you radiation treatment)
- other health care team members

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

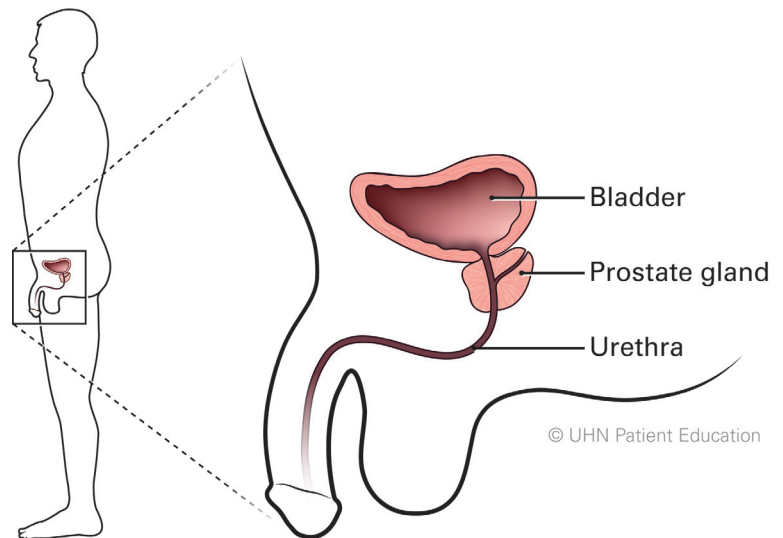
If you have any questions, talk to your radiation therapists at your daily treatment visit. You can also talk to your radiation oncologist or nurse at your weekly review visit.



If you speak very little or no English ask your health care team for someone to interpret (translate in the language of your choice). Tell us as soon as you can if you need someone to interpret for you.

## Why do I need to prepare my bladder and rectum for radiation planning and treatment?

The prostate gland is about the size of a walnut. The prostate gland lies behind the base of the bladder and in front of the rectum. The prostate area can move. How much the prostate area moves depends on how full or empty the bladder and rectum are. The bladder is the organ that holds pee. The rectum holds solid waste (poo) until it leaves through your anus (bum).



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Your health care team needs to direct radiation treatment onto the prostate. The treatment may also target the lymph nodes around the prostate. If your prostate was removed, the treatment targets where your prostate used to be.

Your health care team wants to make sure that organs such as the bladder and rectum get little radiation. This helps to reduce your side effects.

**Before your radiation planning visit, a radiation therapist will review the steps you need to follow. These steps make sure your bladder is full and your rectum is empty. This is how you need to prepare for your planning scan and treatment visits every time.**

**The goal is to make sure your prostate is always in the same place.**

## **How do I prepare my bladder and rectum for radiation planning and treatment?**

Three days before your planning visit, drink at least 8 cups (1.5 to 2 litres) of liquid each day. Drinking 8 cups daily makes sure you are well-hydrated (have enough liquid in your body) for your visit. Make sure to drink lots of liquids during your treatment.

### **To make sure your bladder is full but does not hurt:**

Follow these steps 1 hour before your appointment:

1. First, empty your bladder. This means urinate (go pee) so your bladder is empty.
2. Right after you empty your bladder, drink 2 cups (500 millilitres) of clear liquid. Clear liquids include water or juice. Finish drinking 1 hour before your visit.
3. Do not empty your bladder (pee) after drinking. Your bladder will become full for your visit.
4. When your visit is finished, you can empty your bladder (pee).

**Talk to your health care team if you have trouble keeping your bladder full.**

**To make sure you have an EMPTY rectum:**

- If you have regular bowel movements (poo) every day, you do not need to do anything.
- Try not to eat or drink things that may give you gas. Do not skip meals.

**Talk to your health care team if:**

- **You do not have bowel movements (poo) every day**
- **You always have a lot of gas**

Read this section if you are having a gold marker or rectal spacer process before your planning visit.

**Your rectal spacer or gold marker visit****Visit information:**

- Your process will be a few days before your planning visit
- The process will take 1 hour
- You will have your process at Princess Margaret Cancer Center, Level 1B

**What happens during the process?****If you are getting gold markers:**

- Gold markers help the radiation therapist see where your prostate is during treatment. The gold markers help give precise treatment.
- Your doctor uses a needle to inject 3 gold markers the size of a rice grain into your prostate.
- You will not feel the gold markers after the doctor injects them.

## **If you are getting a rectal spacer:**

- The rectal spacer is a gel that separates the prostate from the rectum. The rectal spacer helps reduce the amount of radiation the rectum gets. The gel is slowly absorbed by the body and goes away after a few months.
- Your doctor can inject the rectal spacer at the same time as the gold markers.
- Most patients may feel some pressure from the rectal spacer. It is rare that patients feel discomfort or pain. This feeling usually lasts for a few minutes and goes away.

## **For both the gold markers and rectal spacer:**

A local anesthetic (drug that keeps you from feeling pain) is used to numb the area. The anesthetic makes the process as painless as possible. An ultrasound (called a transrectal ultrasound) goes inside the rectum and helps guide the needle placement.

The process feels like the transrectal ultrasound for your prostate biopsy. In this process, the needle is put through the skin in between the anus (bum) and scrotum.

You can go home after the process once you feel okay to do so.

If you:

- get a fever
- feel pain or burning when you urinate (pee)
- feel unwell

Call 416 946 2233 and 'press 2' during normal working hours for advice. Outside of working hours call 416 946 2000 and ask for the radiation oncologist on-call.

**If you have a medical emergency go to your closest emergency department.**

## How do I prepare for this process?

### Do this 5 days before your Transrectal Ultrasound (TRUS):

#### 1. Stop taking any aspirin or arthritis medicine. Do not take these medicines:

- Advil
- Naprosyn
- Motrin
- Daypro
- Feldene
- Ponstan
- Voltaren
- Arthrotec
- Celebrex
- Ibuprofen

You can still take acetaminophen (Tylenol) if you need it.

#### 2. Tell your oncologist or health care team before your TRUS if you:

- have heart valve disease
- are taking blood thinning medicine

This includes any blood thinning medicine.

#### 3. Call 416 946 4501 extension 5642 to confirm your appointment (visit).

You can also ask to make sure you are doing the right things to prepare for your TRUS.

### Do this the night before your TRUS

- **Take your first dose of antibiotic (drug used to prevent infections).**
  - Your oncologist will prescribe you these antibiotics.
- **Clean your rectum.**
  - There are **2 ways** you can do this. Choose 1 of the ways below:
- Use a Rectal Fleet Enema®.
  - Use the Rectal Fleet Enema before you go to bed.

#### OR

- Take an Oral Dulcolax® pill (5 milligrams).
  - Take the pill with a glass of water before you go to bed. Do not take the pill with milk.

## **Do this the morning of your TRUS**

- **Take your second dose of antibiotic.**
  - You will take the rest of the antibiotics after the TRUS. Someone from your health care team will teach you how to take them.
- **Eat a light breakfast.**
  - A light breakfast could be a glass of juice and a slice of toast.

**The rest of this pamphlet is information for all patients.**

**For your Planning visit, you must have a full bladder and empty rectum. Please the steps on page 3.**

## **Planning Your Radiation Therapy**

Check in at the front desk on level 1B. We will take your picture to help us know who you are during treatment.

**Expect to be at this visit for about 2 hours.**

### **What can I expect at my CT simulation scan visit?**

We will use a CT simulator to decide on the area of treatment. A CT simulator is a CT scanner that shows detailed x-rays. We need these x-rays to help prepare your treatment.

You may also have an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) to plan your treatment. If you had a gold marker or rectal spacer, you will likely need an MRI.

The radiation therapists may draw marks on your skin. These marks can wash off, so they will give you a few small permanent (long lasting) tattoos. The radiation therapist will explain this process to you first. Your health care team will create a custom treatment plan for you.

## Your Radiation Treatment

For your treatment visits, you must have a full bladder and empty rectum. Your bladder should be as full as it was during your CT planning scan visit. **See page 3 for instructions.**

### **When will I know about my first treatment visit?**

You can expect a phone call a few days after your CT simulation visit. We will give you the date and time of your first visit.

### **Where do I go for my radiation treatment visit?**

Your radiation treatment will be at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre. Check in at the front desk on level 2B when you arrive. The staff there will show you how to check in. Level 2B is 2 levels below the main floor.

### **Can I choose when I have my radiation therapy visits?**

You cannot choose your exact visit time. This is because we treat so many patients every day. Your radiation therapists will try to help you if there are special reasons.

### **What happens at the treatment visit?**

The radiation therapists will check your CT simulation scan. They will take a Cone Beam CT scan (sometimes called a "mini CT"). This scan checks that your body is in the right position (place) for treatment. After your position is checked and any changes are made, your treatment will start.

### **How long is the treatment?**

Plan to be at the hospital for 30 to 60 minutes each day. Your treatments will take about 20 minutes. Most of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position for treatment.



## **Will I see my oncologist during my radiation treatments?**

You will meet with your radiation oncologist and oncology nurse once every week during treatment. They will answer any questions or talk to you about any concerns that you may have. Tell them about any side effects you may be having. You can also talk to the radiation therapists who treat your side effects.

## **How to Manage Common Side Effects from Radiation Treatment**

### **Will I get tired while on treatment?**

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

Keep doing your normal activities if you feel well enough.

#### **Do these things if you are feeling tired:**

- Pace yourself with work or chores that make you feel tired.
- Ask for help with daily chores that you cannot manage.
- Pick something relaxing that you can do every day (for instance, walking or a hobby)
- Keep a regular sleep routine at night and rest during the day if needed.
- Eat a balanced diet and have lots to drink.
- Have healthy, easy to prepare food on hand.
- Eat meals at regular times during the day and eat snacks if needed.

### **Will there be changes in my appetite (desire to eat)?**

Some patients may not feel very hungry while getting treatment.

Chemotherapy (drug that treats cancer) and pain medicines may also lead to a loss of hunger.

**Do these things if your appetite changes:**

- Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day, instead of 3 large meals.
- Eat foods that you enjoy.
- Make the food appeal and interest you.
- Stock up on foods that are easy to prepare.
- Bring a snack when you come for treatment in case there is a delay and you feel hungry.
- Try not to drink too much with meals. Drinking too much may make you feel fuller, which can make you eat less.
- Drink plenty of liquids between meals.
- Light exercise and fresh air may help increase your hunger.

**Speak with your health care team if you would like to meet with a dietitian.**

**Will I have cramps and diarrhea?**

You may have cramps (stomach ache) in your bowel or start to have diarrhea (watery poo).

Having cramps and a lot of gas may happen 3 to 4 weeks after treatment starts. This is because a small part of your bowel may be in the treatment area. The bowel may receive some radiation.

You may have mild diarrhea during the last 2 weeks of treatment. It is rare, but there may be blood in your poop.

## **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 (not getting enough water).
- 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](#). Visit [uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://uhnpatienteducation.ca) and search for brochures by title.
- Sitz baths may help if you have a burning feeling with bowel movements. Sitz baths may help the skin around the groin area feel better. Sitz baths may also help stop hemorrhoids from getting worse. Hemorrhoids are when veins or blood vessels around your bum get swollen. To learn how to take a sitz bath see the pamphlet [Taking Care of Your Skin During Radiation Therapy](#). Visit [uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://uhnpatienteducation.ca) and search for brochures by title.

**Speak with your health care team if you would like to meet with a dietitian.**

## **Will I need to urinate (pee) often and will it be painful?**

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

- You need to urinate often, even at night.
- You have pain or a burning feeling when you urinate.
- You find starting to urinate harder.
- It is rare, but there may be blood in your urine.

### **To help if you urinate often and it is painful:**

- Drink plenty of liquids during the day.
- Do not drink as much 1 or 2 hours before you sleep. Drinking less help you pee less often at night.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine such as coffee, tea and cola.

Talk to your health care team if these side effects persist. They may check for a bladder infection. There may be medicine you can take to feel better.

### **Will treatment affect my sex life?**

Cancer and cancer treatment can change the way you enjoy or have sex. Talk to your oncologist or nurse if you or your partner have questions.

**The side effects listed in this booklet are the most common ones. You may also have other side effects that were not listed. Sometimes the tumour and the treatment can cause the same symptoms.** Tell your health care team if you have any symptoms.

## What to expect when you finish therapy

Near the end of your treatment, we will give you a booklet titled [Questions to Ask Before You Finish Your Radiation Therapy](#). Find this booklet by visiting [uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://uhnpatienteducation.ca) and search by title. At your final weekly review visit you will get a follow-up date to see the doctor. This visit will be a few weeks or months after your treatment is finished.

After treatment is done, some of your side effects will persist. The side effects may get worse before they start to get better. This is normal. Follow your health care team's advice until you feel better.

Call the hospital once you finish treatment if you have any questions or concerns.

## Need more information?

Please visit the Patient and Family Library on the main floor, or call them at: 416 946 4501 extension 5383.

You can also visit the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre web site at [www.theprincessmargaret.ca](http://www.theprincessmargaret.ca) for more information services and about your treatment.

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