

# What to do when Receiving Radiation Therapy to the Abdomen



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This pamphlet will provide you with information about what to expect while receiving radiation therapy to the abdominal area.

Many patients receive radiation therapy without major side effects. You can help to prevent or reduce these side effects by using the following information. Your radiation oncologist, nurse case manager and radiation therapist will provide you and your family with care, support and information throughout your course of treatment. Please ask your radiation therapist any questions when you come for treatment each day or when you see your doctor (radiation oncologist) or nurse case manager at your weekly review session.

## Planning the Radiation Therapy Treatments

If the nurse in the Outpatient Clinic has given you instructions for dietary guidelines or bowel preparation, please make sure that these instructions are followed before you come to your treatment planning appointment.

- Please check in at the reception desk on level 1B, where your photograph will be taken to help us in identifying you during the course of your treatment.
- The radiation oncologist and radiation therapist will use a CT simulator to determine the area of treatment. A CT simulator is a CT scanner with sophisticated computer software that provides the team with detailed images of the body. This scanning procedure is required to plan your radiation therapy even if you have had previous CT scans for diagnosis. When the area for treatment is determined, marks are placed on the skin. As these marks can wear off, it will be necessary to give you small permanent tattoo marks using a fine, sterile needle. The radiation therapists will explain this procedure to you.

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- You can expect to be here for at least 1 hour for your planning appointment. The doctors, physicists and radiation therapists will continue to work with the information obtained during the planning process to develop a plan that is specific to you.

You will then be called at home with the date and time of your first treatment appointment.

## **Your Radiation Therapy Treatments (Level 2B – 2 below main floor)**

- The first day on the treatment unit will take about 30 minutes because the radiation therapists and other members of the team will be checking all aspects of the treatment plan before starting your treatment.
- As part of your first treatment, the radiation therapists will take x-rays or electronic images. These will be used to make sure that your treatment matches exactly what was planned. This procedure may be done again during your course of treatment.
- For the rest of your treatments, you can expect to be in the room for about 15 minutes. The actual radiation treatment will only take a few minutes to deliver, while the rest of the time is taken up to make sure that you are in the correct position for your treatment. However, longer treatment times may be needed for some patients.
- During the course of treatment, you will see the doctor and the nurse case manager once every week to monitor your progress and to address any concerns or questions you have.

## **Radiation Side Effects**

Radiation side effects vary from person to person. These side effects depend on:

- the area of your body being treated
- the type of radiation used
- the amount of radiation given
- whether you are having chemotherapy at the same time
- your general health

## **Common Side Effects of Radiation Therapy to the Abdomen**

### **Will the radiation treatments affect my appetite?**

Some patients may experience loss of appetite while receiving treatment. Chemotherapy and pain medications may also cause loss of appetite.

### **What should I do?**

- Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day (instead of 3 large meals a day)
- Eat foods that you enjoy
- 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 the need to eat
- Take care not to have too much to drink with meals so that you do not fill up on fluids
- Light exercise may help your appetite
- Eat calorie & protein-dense foods
- An appointment with a dietitian can be arranged

### **Will I experience nausea and vomiting?**

When treatment is given to the abdomen, the stomach and bowels may be irritated and this may cause nausea and vomiting during the course of the treatment. The doctor can prescribe an anti-nausea medication for you if that happens.

### **What should I do?**

- Eat small meals often throughout the day (nausea is often worse on an empty stomach)
- Try snacks such as dry crackers, melba toast and plain cookies
- Try to avoid foods that are rich, spicy, and greasy or those that have a strong odour, such as bacon, onions, garlic, cooked broccoli and cabbage
- Drink plenty of fluids between meals such as water, watered-down fruit juices and flat ginger ale to avoid dehydration when vomiting happens
- Popsicles and Jello can also be used to replace fluid loss
- Take your anti-nausea medication as prescribed by your doctor

- Patients with diabetes may need individual nutritional counseling
- An appointment with a dietitian can be arranged

### **Will the radiation treatments affect my bowel?**

If the bowel is in the treatment area you may experience some irritation to the bowel. This may cause cramps and/or mild diarrhea during the third or fourth week of treatment.

### **What should I do?**

- Continue to eat what you would normally eat, unless diarrhea occurs.
- Ask your radiation therapists or nurse case manager for the “Eating Hints for People with Diarrhea” pamphlet.
- Eat more soluble fibre (e.g., applesauce, bananas, oats, barley and rye).
- Eat less insoluble fibre (found in foods such as whole grains, fruits and vegetables).
- Choose grain products made with white flour and take off the skins and seeds of fruits and vegetables.
- Eat foods that are low in fat, lactose (a natural sugar found in milk which can be hard to digest during treatment), and also low in caffeine & spices.
- Medications can be taken to relieve the diarrhea (such as Imodium).
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. Most people should aim for 8-10 cups of liquids per day.
- An appointment with a dietitian can be arranged.

### **Will the radiation treatments make me more tired?**

Some patients may feel tired after having a few treatments. This can be due to travel, change of routine, emotional impact and the treatment itself. The radiation treatment can in some cases cause a drop in your blood counts.

### **What should I do?**

- Take naps when you can.
- Eat well balanced meals.
- Snack often throughout the day.

- Stock up on foods that are easy to make. When you are feeling well, make extra servings of your favourite foods and freeze them for the times that you don't feel like cooking.
- Drink lots of fluids.
- Stay active – but don't overdo it.
- Pace yourself especially with activities that can be overtiring.
- Ask family members or friends to help with other commitments/daily activities.

### **Will the radiation affect my fertility?**

Depending on the area of the abdomen being treated there may be a possibility of affecting fertility. If this is the case, your doctor will discuss this with you.

### **Will the radiation affect my skin?**

Patients receiving radiation treatment commonly experience changes to the skin in the area where the treatment is given. This is a normal and temporary side effect of treatment. The most common change in the area during the first three weeks of treatment is a reddening of the skin.

### **What will it feel like?**

- Your skin may feel warm, dry, itchy
- Your skin may look slightly red or tanned

### **What should I do?**

- Wash with warm water and gently pat dry
- Use a mild, unscented soap such as Dove or Ivory
- Avoid rubbing or scratching the area
- Wear loose fitting clothing. Cotton or soft fabrics are recommended.
- Aloe Vera gel can be applied to the treated areas 3 to 4 times per day to reduce itching
- Use a water-based moisturising cream such as Lubriderm or Glaxal Base cream
- Do not expose the area to direct sunlight unless using sun block with SPF 30 or more

## **You may experience other skin changes, such as:**

- Itchy, dry, scaly
- Flaking and/or peeling of the skin

## **What should I do?**

- Stop using Aloe Vera gel
- Continue to use the moisturising cream on the dry areas
- At your weekly appointment with the doctor, ask about any medication that can be prescribed to help

## **Sexuality**

Cancer and its treatment can affect your sexual function and feelings. If you and/or your partner have any questions or concerns, please speak to your doctor.

## **What happens when the treatment is finished?**

- At your last weekly review appointment, your doctor or nurse case manager will give you a follow-up appointment to see the doctor several weeks or months after your last radiation treatment appointment.
- After your last radiation treatment appointment, any side effects will generally subside within 1 to 2 weeks, although in some patients the effects may take longer to resolve.
- Continue with dietary or skin routines until you recover.
- Continue caring for your skin in the same way as when you were receiving radiation, until you notice your skin getting back to normal.
- The area of the skin that was treated will now be more sensitive to the sun on a permanent basis. We recommend that you cover this area when out in the sun or use sunscreen with SPF of 30 or higher at all times.
- Do not hesitate to call the hospital once you are finished with your treatment, if you have any questions or concerns.

Please visit the Patient and Family Library on the main floor for additional information and resources related to your treatment. Or go to [www.uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://www.uhnpatienteducation.ca). You can also contact the Patient Education Department by:

Telephone: (416) 946-4501 ext. 5090

Email: [patienteducationpmh@uhn.on.ca](mailto:patienteducationpmh@uhn.on.ca)