

What To Do When Receiving Radiation Therapy to the Brain



UHN

This pamphlet will give you information about what to expect while receiving radiation therapy for tumours in the Brain.

You may reduce the possible side effects of Radiation Therapy by using the following information. Your Radiation Oncologist, Specialized Oncology Nurse and Radiation Therapist will provide you, your family and / or friends with care, support and information throughout your course of treatment. Please ask any questions that you may have when you come for treatment each day. Your Radiation Therapists will address your concerns or refer you to other members of your health care team. Additionally, you may bring your questions to your radiation oncologist or oncology nurse at your weekly review appointment.

Planning the Radiation Treatment (level 1B)

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 and possibly an MR simulator to determine the area of treatment. A CT simulator is a CT scanner with special computer software that provides the team with detailed, x-ray images of your head area. Sometimes, an MR simulator using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is also used to provide more detailed images of the area to be treated.

To keep your head from moving during each treatment, a device that fits around your head will be made for you at the CT simulation appointment. This device is referred to as a mask, and will be used during your treatment course to help with your daily treatment set-up. When the area for treatment is determined, the radiation therapists will draw marks on the mask to help with daily positioning. The Radiation Therapist will explain this procedure to you.

The CT simulation appointment usually takes about 45 minutes. The doctors, physicists and therapists will continue to work on the information obtained during the planning process to develop a plan that is specific to you.

Usually a few days after your CT simulation appointment, the booking staff will call you at home and inform you of the date and time of your first radiation therapy appointment.

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First Day of Treatment (level 2B)

Please report to the level 2B reception desk on your first day of treatment. The staff there will show you the procedure for checking in.

The first day on the treatment unit may take about 30 minutes because the Radiation Therapist, and other members of the team, will be checking all aspects of the treatment plan. The Radiation Therapists will take images similar to the CT images taken at the CT simulation appointment. These images will be used to ensure that your treatment area matches exactly as it was planned. These images will be repeated daily during your course of treatment.

For the remainder of your treatments, you may be in the room for about 15 to 25 minutes. Most of this time will be taken to ensure you are in the correct position for treatment, and only a fraction of that time will be used to deliver your radiation treatment.

Concurrent Temozolomide (Temodal®)

Some patients are prescribed a chemotherapy drug (Temodal®) to be taken by mouth on a daily basis while they are receiving radiation treatments. Temodal® should be taken as prescribed, along with anti-nausea medication. Please follow the instructions carefully. For more information, please see the pamphlet entitled: *Concurrent Treatment for Brain Tumours: Radiation Therapy and Chemotherapy Together*.

Side Effects

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

- The part of the body being treated
- The type of radiation used
- The amount of radiation given
- A person's general health

Most side effects are temporary and will settle down approximately 2 to 4 weeks after your last treatment.

Will I get headaches, nausea and vomiting?

Radiation treatment to the brain may cause swelling in the treatment area. This can lead to headaches and sometimes nausea and vomiting.

What can I do?

Your doctor will be able to prescribe medications for these symptoms, such as steroids, to reduce the swelling and anti nausea medication.

Will I lose my hair?

Hair loss is dependant on the total amount of radiation given. Your doctor will tell you if this is to be expected in your case. It is important to remember that hair loss will only happen in the area being treated by radiation. For many patients, the hair will start to grow back after the treatments are finished. When it does come back, the hair may have a different color and texture than before treatment, and may be thinner.

What can I do?

- Cut your hair short
- Visit the wig boutique on the 3rd floor for advice on wigs or hats
- Protect your scalp from sun exposure and cold winds

Will my skin get sore?

The most common change in the area during the first three weeks of treatment is a reddening of the skin. Your skin (scalp) may look slightly red or tanned and may feel warm, dry, and itchy.

What can I do?

- Wash with warm water and gently pat dry
- Avoid rubbing or scratching the area.
- If there is no hair in the affected area:
 - You may apply Aloe Vera gel to help to reduce itching, and a water-based moisturising cream such as Lubriderm® or Glaxal Base® cream.
 - Only apply Aloe Vera gel after each day's treatment and not before, as the skin must be dry and free of gel before treatment is given.
- Do not expose the area to direct sunlight. Wear a hat.
- Wash your hair using a mild shampoo. If you do use a hairdryer, make sure it is on a cool setting.

Will I get tired while on treatment?

Fatigue is a common side effect of radiation therapy. It usually starts a few weeks into the treatment. The degree of fatigue varies with each person but usually increases until the end of treatment, then improves over 1 to 2 months after treatment. Continue with normal activities if you feel well enough to do so.

What suggestions do you have for managing Fatigue?

- Pace yourself, especially with activities that are tiring, and rest as you need to.
- Ask for help with daily activities that you cannot manage.
- Keep well hydrated by drinking lots of fluids.

- Eat enough calories and protein so that you are not losing weight which will also contribute to your fatigue.
- Research has shown that exercise may reduce the fatigue or stops it from getting worse. Exercise may involve a brief 10 to 15 minute walk three times a week if you are able to do this.
- Do something you enjoy each day such as a hobby, walking outside in nature or reading.

Other symptoms:

Occasionally, patients experience a "plugged ear" sensation after a few weeks of their treatments. This symptom is due to swelling around the ear structures caused by the radiation. This "plugged ear" sensation usually goes away on its own but can take several weeks.

If you have pain and are on regular codeine based pain medications, you may have constipation. You may need to adjust your diet or obtain a prescription for a stool softener or laxative. Please speak to your oncology nurse or oncologist if you are experiencing this symptom.

In general, talk to your healthcare team about your symptoms because they can be related to your cancer, the radiation treatment and / or your medications.

What about exercise and other activities?

If you are feeling extremely tired or having physical symptoms related to your disease or treatment, you may also have to stop doing routine activities such going to the gym or gardening. Ask your oncologist about driving a vehicle or operating machinery during this time.

Inform your radiation therapist, nurse and your oncologist if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- Onset of headaches
- Increase in the severity of existing headaches
- Severe nausea or vomiting
- Fainting or dizziness or seizures
- Weakness in arms, legs, hands or feet
- Any sudden changes in bladder or bowel habits

The presence of any of these symptoms may require a change to your medication or treatment schedule.

After all your treatments is finished:

Symptoms from treatment will begin to disappear 2 to 4 weeks after your last radiation treatment. The skin reaction will gradually disappear and you can begin to go back to your normal skin care routine. You should continue to protect the skin in the treated area from the sun by using a sunscreen or hat.

You will be given a follow up appointment to see your oncologist, usually 4 to 6 weeks after your treatment has finished.

Important Contact numbers:

Radiation Oncologist: _____

Oncology Nurse: _____

For additional information:

PMH Patient and Family Library

(416) 946-2000 ext.5383, Main floor.

<http://www.uhn.ca/pmh/services/library.asp>

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