

# What to do When Receiving Radiation Therapy to the Spinal Cord Area (CNS)

UHN

**This pamphlet will give you information about what to expect while receiving radiation therapy for tumours in the spinal cord area.**

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 give you, your family and/or friends 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 try to answer your questions or refer you to other members of your health care team. You may also bring your questions to your radiation oncologist or oncology nurse at your weekly review appointment.

## **Planning the Radiation Treatment (level 1B)**

Check in at the reception desk on level 1B, where your photograph will be taken to help us identify 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 special computer software that provides the team with detailed, x-ray images of your body. Sometimes, we also use an MR simulator using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to provide more detailed images of the area to be treated. A few small tattoos will be placed on you stomach area and these marks will be used to make sure you are in the right position during your course of treatments.

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The CT simulation appointment usually takes about 45 minutes and the MR simulation appointment takes about 1 hour. The doctors, physicists and therapists will continue to work on the information they get 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 let you know the date and time of your first radiation therapy appointment.

## **First Day of Treatment (level 2B)**

Go to the level 2B reception desk on your first day of treatment. The staff there will show you how to check 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 parts of the treatment plan. The Radiation Therapists will take images like the ones taken at the CT simulation appointment. These images will be used to make sure that your treatment area matches exactly as it was planned. These images will be repeated during your course of treatment.

For the rest of your treatments, you may be in the room for about 15 to 25 minutes depending on the type of treatment you are receiving. Most of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position for your treatment. Delivering your radiation treatment will take only a very short time.

### **Watch for these 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 about 2 to 4 weeks after your last treatment.

## **Radiation treatment to the spinal cord area**

### **Will my skin get sore?**

- You can expect little changes to the skin in the treatment area. The most common change in the area during the first 3 weeks of treatment is a reddening of the skin. Your skin may look slightly red or tanned and may feel warm, dry, or itchy.

**What can I do?**

- Shower or bathe with warm water and gently pat dry.
- Use a mild soap such as Dove<sup>®</sup> or Ivory<sup>®</sup>.
- Avoid rubbing or scratching the area.
- Use a water-based moisturising cream such as Lubriderm or Glaxal based cream and you may use Aloe Vera gel to help to reduce itching.
- Only put on cream or gel **after** each day's treatment and not before, because your skin must be dry and free of cream before treatment is given.
- Do not expose the area to direct sunlight.

**You may have other skin changes, such as**

- Flaking and/or peeling of the skin.

**What can I do?**

- Stop using Aloe Vera gel.
- Continue to use the moisturising cream on the dry areas.

**Will radiation to my spine affect my blood count?**

- Your spine has bone marrow, which makes red and white blood cells and platelets. Radiation to a large part of the spine can lower your blood count.
- You may have a lower white blood count and platelet count during the course of treatment. But, it is rarely enough that you will need to stop treatment.
- You may also have a lower red blood count a month after treatment.
- Your doctor will probably order some routine blood tests to check your blood count.

**Will I get nausea, vomiting or diarrhea from having radiation to my spine?**

- You can expect nausea and vomiting because of irritation of the throat, stomach and bowels.
- For the upper spine area, you may have difficulty in swallowing, and some people may have symptoms similar to heart burn.
- For the lower spine area, radiation may lead to diarrhea.
- Your oncologist will prescribe medications for these symptoms.

**What can I do to cope with nausea and vomiting?**

- Take your anti-nausea medication as prescribed by your doctor.
- Eat small frequent meals throughout the day, nausea is often worse on an empty stomach.
- Use dry, starchy foods such as crackers, melba toast and plain cookies to help settle your stomach.
- Choose cold foods or foods served at room temperature if food smells bother you.
- Sip fluids such as water, diluted fruit juices and flat ginger ale throughout the day. This is very important if you have vomiting.

- If you have diabetes, you may need one-on-one nutrition counselling. We can make an appointment with a registered dietitian for you.
- For more information, ask your radiation therapist or oncology nurse for the “Dealing with Nausea” pamphlet.

### **What can I do to cope with diarrhea?**

- Eat what you normally would until you get diarrhea.
- You may need medication, such as Imodium, to control diarrhea.
- A diet low in fibre can help you cope with diarrhea. Avoid foods such as whole grain breads and cereals, dried peas and beans, nuts and seeds.
- Avoid high fat foods, caffeine and spices as they may make diarrhea worse.
- Switch to lactose reduced dairy products if you develop a temporary intolerance to lactose (the natural sugar in milk).
- Sip fluids such as water, diluted fruit juices and caffeine-free soft drinks throughout the day. This is very important in order to avoid dehydration.
- For more information, ask your radiation therapists or oncology nurse for the “Eating Hints For People with Diarrhea” pamphlet.
- We can make an appointment with a dietician for you.

## **Other side effects when having radiation to the spine**

### **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. How much fatigue you feel is different from person to person, but usually you will have more fatigue at the end of treatment. Then it improves over 1 or 2 months after treatment. Do your normal activities if you feel well enough.

### **What are some ways that will help me cope with fatigue?**

- Pace yourself, especially with activities that are tiring. Rest as you need to.
- Keep well hydrated by drinking lots of fluids.
- Eat enough calories and protein so that you are not losing weight which will also add to your fatigue.
- Ask for help with your everyday activities that you cannot manage.
- Research has shown that exercise may reduce fatigue or prevent it from getting worse. Exercise may be a 10 to 15 minute walk three times a week if you can handle it.
- Do something you enjoy each day such as a hobby or walking outside.

### **What about exercise and other activities?**

You may also have to stop doing regular activities because of fatigue or other physical symptoms related to your disease or treatment. Ask your doctor about driving a vehicle or operating machinery during this time.

### **What are some ways that can help me improve my appetite?**

Some patients may lose interest in food while receiving radiation therapy. Chemotherapy and pain medications can also cause loss of appetite.

- Eat small frequent meals throughout the day instead of 3 large meals.
- Have your biggest meal when you feel most hungry.
- Stock up on foods that are ready-to-eat or easy to prepare.
- Light exercise and fresh air may help your appetite
- We have other pamphlets to help you with your appetite. Please ask your radiation therapists or healthcare team members.
- We can make an appointment with a registered dietitian for you.

*For more resource about nutrition during cancer treatment pick up a copy of the book called "Goes Down Easy: Recipes to help you cope with the challenge of eating during cancer treatment". It is available from the PMH Patient & Family Library.*

### **Watch for these other symptoms:**

- Severe nausea or vomiting
- Fainting or dizziness
- Weakness in arms, legs, hands or feet
- Pins and needles sensation in hands or feet
- Any sudden changes in bladder or bowel habits

**Talk to your doctor if you have any of these symptoms.** Having any of these symptoms might mean changing your medication or treatment schedule.

### **After treatment is finished:**

Symptoms from treatment will begin to disappear about 2 to 4 weeks after your last radiation treatment. The skin reaction will slowly 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.

We will give you a follow up appointment to see your radiation oncologist usually 4 to 6 weeks after your treatment has finished.

### **Important Contact numbers:**

Radiation Oncologist: \_\_\_\_\_

Oncology Nurse: \_\_\_\_\_

For more information:

**PMH Patient & Family Library**

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

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

**e mail address:** [patienteducationpmh@uhn.on.ca](mailto:patienteducationpmh@uhn.on.ca)