What to expect when getting radiation therapy to the abdomen

Princess Margaret

Information for patients who are having radiation therapy

Read this pamphlet to learn about:

- Your radiation therapy planning
- Your radiation therapy 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

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

You can expect to be here for about 1 hour for this appointment.

If you have been given dietary guidelines to follow for your CT and Treatment appointments, please follow the instructions.

If you have any questions about the dietary guidelines, please ask your radiation therapist.

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.

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.
In some cases, the doctor may recommend a device that controls your breathing such as the Active Breathing Coordinator™ (ABC). If you need this device, we will teach you about it first. For more information please read the pamphlet called “Active Breathing Coordinator™ (ABC) Device”.

Sometimes the doctor may recommend a dye, given to you by needle or as a drink. If you need that dye, we will give you more information about it first. Please tell the doctor, nurse and radiation therapist if you have an allergy to the dye.

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

Your radiation therapy treatment

When will I get my first radiation therapy appointment?

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

Where do I go for my radiation therapy?

You get 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.
Can I choose when I have my radiation therapy appointments?

A large number of patients are treated every day. Because of this, we may not be able to give you the times that you ask for. Your radiation therapists will try to help you if you have special reasons for needing an exact time.

What to expect at your radiation therapy appointment

If you were given dietary guidelines, please make sure you have followed them.

The radiation therapists will check the measurements from your CT simulation scan. They will take a Cone Beam CT scan to check that you are in the same position every day. Once your position has been checked and any changes have been made, you will have your radiation treatment.

How long is the course of treatment?

You should plan to be at the hospital for 30 to 60 minutes each day. Your treatments will take about 20 to 45 minutes, depending on the treatment you are having. Most of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position for treatment.

Will I see the oncologist (cancer doctor) during my radiation therapy appointment?

You will meet with your radiation oncologist and nurse once every week during your treatment. He or she 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.
How to manage common side effects from radiation therapy

**Skin changes**
You may have changes to your skin in the treatment area. This is a normal side effect and will get better.

Your skin may feel **irritated** after 2 to 3 weeks of treatment. Some areas may become **dry, flaky** patches in later weeks.

To learn how to care for your skin, see the pamphlet “Taking care of your skin during radiation therapy”

The skin in the area being treated will begin to heal about 2 to 3 weeks after finishing your radiation treatments.

**Will I get tired while on treatment?**
Fatigue (feeling very tired) is a common side effect of radiation therapy. You may have fatigue because of:

- travel
- change in routine
- emotional impact
- treatment itself

The radiation treatment can in some cases cause a drop in your blood count.
How much fatigue you feel varies from person to 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. Continue doing your usual activities if you feel well enough to do so.

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

- Watch your activity level. Consider setting aside less important activities for a time when you are feeling less 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
- Ask to see a Dietitian for help with food choices and nutrition
- Have healthy, easy to prepare food on hand
- Eat meals at regular times through the day and snacks if you need them
Will there be changes in my appetite?

You may not feel very hungry while having treatment. Chemotherapy and pain medications can also make you lose your 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
- Drink plenty of fluids between meals to stay hydrated
- Use meal supplements (such as Ensure) if you aren't able to eat enough solid food
- Light exercise and fresh air may help your appetite

Please speak with a member of your health care team if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.
Will I get an upset stomach?

When you are having treatment to the abdomen, you may have nausea and vomiting. This happens because the stomach and bowels can get irritated.

Please let your radiation oncologist, nurse and radiation therapist know if you have nausea or vomiting. The doctor may give you a prescription for anti-nausea medication.

Do these things if you have nausea and vomiting:

- 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 anti-nausea medication if your doctor prescribes it
- Ask to see a dietitian for help with food choices and nutrition
- If you have diabetes you may need to see a dietitian

Please speak to a member of your health care team if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.

Will the radiation treatments affect my bowel?

If the bowel is in the treatment area you may have cramps or mild diarrhea. This happens because of irritation to the bowel. Please let your radiation oncologist, nurse and radiation therapist know if this happens.
Do these things if you have cramping, stomach ache and mild diarrhea:

- Keep eating what you would normally eat, unless you have cramping or diarrhea
- Ask your radiation therapist or nurse for the “Eating Hints for People with Diarrhea” pamphlet
- Eat foods that are low in fibre
- Eat foods that are low in fat
- Have less caffeine and use fewer spices
- Have less lactose in your diet if this is a problem
- Eat frequent smaller meals instead of 3 larger meals each day
- Drink 8 to 10 cups of liquid a day to prevent dehydration if you have diarrhea
- Medicine such as Imodium or Lomotil may help so check with your doctor or nurse. You may be referred to a dietitian

Please speak with a member of your health care team if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.

Will the radiation affect my fertility?

Depending on the area of the abdomen being treated, there is a chance that your fertility is affected. If this is the case, your doctor will talk with you about it.

Can radiation affect sex?

Cancer and cancer treatment can affect your sexual function and feelings. If you or your partner have any questions or concerns, please talk with your doctor.
What to expect when you finish radiation therapy

Near the end of your treatment, we will give you a booklet titled “Questions to ask before you finish your radiation treatment.”

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 hospital once you are finished with your 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 for more information and resources about your treatment and also services at the cancer centre.

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