

What to Expect When Getting Radiation Therapy to the Chest

For patients having radiation therapy at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre

Read this pamphlet to learn about:

- your radiation therapy planning
- your radiation therapy treatment
- how to manage common side effects from radiation therapy
- what to expect when you finish radiation therapy
- where to get more information

For more information on Radiation Therapy, please watch our [patient education videos](http://www.whattoexpectrt.theprincessmargaret.ca) (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.

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.

Sometimes the doctor may use a dye, given to you by needle. If you need the 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 do I get my first radiation therapy appointment?

You can expect a phone call at home a few days after your CT simulation. 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. You may choose a time range on your CT simulation appointment form. Your radiation therapists will also try to help you if you have special reasons for needing an exact time.

What to expect at your radiation therapy appointment

Your radiation therapists will bring you into the treatment unit and position you on the treatment table in your treatment position. They will check the measurements from your treatment plan. They will take a Cone Beam CT scan (sometimes called a “mini CT”) to check that you are in the same position every day.

How long is the treatment?

You should plan to be at the hospital for 30 to 60 minutes each day. Your treatments will take about 15 to 25 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 meet with your radiation oncologist and nurse once a week during your course of radiation therapy. They can answer your questions and talk to you about any concerns that you may have. Tell them about any side effects you have.

How to manage common side effects from radiation treatment

Some common side effects are listed below. However you may also have other side effects. Tell your radiation oncologist, radiation therapists, oncology (cancer) nurse what side effects you have.

Skin changes

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

- After 2 to 3 weeks of treatment, your skin may feel irritated: warm, red, swollen, dry and tight, itchy
- In later weeks, areas of your skin may have dry, flaky patches.

To learn how to care for your skin, see the pamphlet [Taking Care of Your Skin during Radiation Therapy](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Taking_Care_of_Your_Skin_during_Radiation_Therapy.pdf)

(https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Taking_Care_of_Your_Skin_during_Radiation_Therapy.pdf).

Will I get tired while on treatment?

Fatigue (feeling very tired) is a common side effect of radiation therapy. The level of fatigue varies with each person. Fatigue often begins early in treatment. It can slowly increase during treatment. It usually gets better 1 to 2 months after treatment is done. Do your usual activities if you feel well enough to do so.

Do these things if you are feeling tired:

- Pace yourself. Break jobs down into smaller parts.
- Ask for help with activities you do every day that makes you tired or you find hard to do.
- Pick a relaxing activity. For example, walk or do a light physical activity or hobby. Pick something that you are able to do every day.
- Plan time to rest before and after activities.
- Rest during the day as needed.
- Have healthy, easy to prepare food on hand.
- Get enough food and fluids. See the tips in this resource.

Will there be changes in my appetite?

Some patients may not feel very hungry while having treatment. Chemotherapy and pain medications may also lead to a loss of 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
- Carry a snack with you when you come for treatment, in case you are delayed and feel hungry
- Use meal supplements (such as Ensure) if you aren't able to take in enough solid foods
- Drink plenty of fluids between meals to stay hydrated
- 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 treatment is given to your chest area, there is a small chance that you will have nausea and vomiting. This depends on where in the chest your treatment is given. Chemotherapy and pain medications may also lead to nausea and vomiting.

Please let your radiation therapists, nurse or radiation oncologist 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 Jell-O can also be used to replace fluid loss
- Take anti-nausea medication if your doctor prescribes it
- If you have diabetes you may need to see a dietitian

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

Will the treatment affect my esophagus?

Your esophagus (the swallowing tube connecting your throat to your stomach) may be in the treatment area. It may get **dry, scratchy** and **irritated** at first. Later on, you may feel like you have a lump in your throat and find it hard and painful to swallow.

Please tell your radiation oncologist, nurse or radiation therapist if you have this side effect.

Do these things if you have changes to your esophagus:

- Switch to eating softer foods and use sauces or gravy to make food less dry
- Be careful with food that may be irritating such as:
 - hard or rough textured foods that may irritate your throat and esophagus
 - highly spiced (hot) food
 - highly acidic foods (such as oranges and tomatoes)
- If you find eating hot or cold food irritating, try them at room temperature
- Use meal supplements (such as Ensure) if you aren't able to take in enough solid foods
- Drink plenty of fluids between meals to stay hydrated
- Avoid smoking and alcohol
- Ask your radiation oncologist about medical therapies for your symptoms

Please talk with your health care team if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.

Will I get a cough?

If you have a new cough or you are coughing more during treatment than you did before, please tell your radiation oncologist, nurse and radiation therapist.

Do these things if you have a cough:

- Drink more fluids to prevent dehydration
- Use an air humidifier
- Avoid smoking and alcohol
- Speak to your doctor about cough medication

Call your doctor if you have a fever or cough up yellow, green or bloody mucus

Will I get shortness of breath?

If you have new or increased shortness of breath during treatment, please tell your radiation oncologist, nurse and radiation therapist.

Do these things if you have shortness of breath:

- Use your home oxygen as directed (if you are now taking oxygen)
- Do less physical activity
- Relax and move more slowly
- Keep calm
- Avoid smoking and alcohol
- Tell your doctor and health care team

What to expect when you finish radiation therapy

Near the end of your treatment, we will give you a booklet called [Questions to Ask Before You Finish Your Radiation Treatment](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/What_to_do_When_Finishing_Radiation_Therapy.pdf) (https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/What_to_do_When_Finishing_Radiation_Therapy.pdf).

You will be given a follow-up appointment to see the doctor at your final weekly review appointment. You will see your 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.

Will I get any chest problems from radiation treatment?

Many patients complain of a cough during radiation treatment. Radiation treatment rarely causes worsening shortness of breath during the treatment period. However, some patients can develop shortness of breath, a cough and a low fever anywhere from 6 weeks to 12 months after the treatment has finished.

This may be due to a radiation reaction (inflammation) in the lungs called radiation pneumonitis. The chance of this happening in part depends on the size of the radiation treatment area and the total amount of radiation given. A chest x-ray sometimes helps to see if radiation is the cause of shortness of breath. Call your oncologist or nurse if these symptoms are of concern to you.

Need more information?

Princess Margaret Cancer Centre:

Princess Margaret Patient and Family Library

Main floor

Monday to Thursday, 8:30 am – 4:30 pm, Friday, 8:30 am – 4:00 pm

Phone: 416 946 4482

Fax: 416 946 2084

Email: patienteducationpmh@uhn.ca

Website: https://www.uhn.ca/PrincessMargaret/Health_Professionals/Programs_Departments/Cancer_Education

You can take part in classes, download eBooks and get other valuable resources through the Cancer Education Program at Princess Margaret.



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