

# What to Expect When Getting Radiation Therapy to the Abdomen and Pelvis

## For patients with gynecological cancer

Read this pamphlet to learn about:

- The main steps in planning radiation treatment
- How to manage common side effects
- What happens when you finish treatment
- Where to get more information

Radiation therapy is the use of a high energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. For more information on Radiation Therapy, please watch our patient education videos at [www.whattoexpectrt.theprincessmargaret.ca](http://www.whattoexpectrt.theprincessmargaret.ca).

These videos:

- Give a step-by-step guide to the radiation therapy treatment process.
- Explain how radiation works in the body.
- Shows how your health care team works to give high quality treatment.



Your radiation therapy team consists of:

- your radiation oncologist (cancer doctor who uses radiation to treat cancer)
- radiation oncology nurses (nurses who care for patients during radiation treatment)
- radiation therapists (the person who gives you radiation treatment)
- other health care team members

Your radiation therapy team 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 visit. You can also talk to your radiation oncologist or nurse at your weekly review visit.



If you speak very little or no English ask your health care team for someone to interpret (translate in the language of your choice). Tell us as soon as you can if you need someone to interpret for you.

## Your Radiation Therapy Planning

### How do I prepare for the radiation planning appointment?

Before your planning visit, a nurse or radiation therapist will review the steps you need to follow to prepare for your visit. The steps will make sure your bladder is full and your rectum is empty for your visit. The bladder is the organ that holds pee. The rectum holds solid waste (poo) until it leaves through your anus (bottom).

Follow these steps for your planning scan and for every treatment visit you have. For more information on how to prepare, read "Preparing for Your CT Planning Scan and Radiation Treatments".

If you were not asked to do anything to prepare, eat and drink as normal. Keep taking the medicines that your health care team or other doctors prescribed.

Do NOT use vaginal tampons during your CT planning appointment or during your radiation treatments.

### **Where do I go for this visit?**

Check in at the reception desk on level 1B at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre.

During the scan visit, we will take your picture and save it in your file. That way we know who you are when you come for treatment. When you are done, go to the waiting room. Your radiation therapist will come and meet you in the waiting room.

**Expect the visit to last 1 to 2 hours.**

### **What can I expect at my CT simulation scan visit?**

Your health care team will use a CT simulator to decide on the area of treatment. A CT simulator is a CT scanner that shows detailed x-rays. Your health care team needs these x-rays to help prepare your treatment. You may also have an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) to plan your treatment.

- The radiation therapists may draw marks on your skin. These marks can wash off. The marks are meant to mark the place on your skin where you may get a few tiny permanent (long lasting) tattoos. These tattoos look like tiny freckles and will be used during treatment. The tattoos will help get you into the same position (place) each time. When you are in the same position it ensures you get your radiation therapy in the exact same place.

The radiation therapist will explain this process to you first. Your health care team will create a custom treatment plan for you.

## Your Radiation Therapy

### Where do I go for my radiation therapy?

You will 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.

### How long is the course of treatment?

Plan to be at the hospital for 1 hour each day. Your treatments will take about 20 minutes. Most of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position (place) for treatment. Your first treatment may take longer. It may take longer because your radiation therapists will be checking the information from your plan before treatment.

Before treatment, scans are taken to check that you are in the correct position for treatment each time.

**For your radiation therapy treatment visits, you must have a full bladder and empty rectum. Your bladder should be as full as it was during your CT planning scan visit. Check the pamphlet you were given: Preparing for Your CT Planning Scan and Radiation Treatments.**

If you have not been asked to do anything to prepare, eat and drink as normal. If you are taking medicines, keep taking all medicines you have been prescribed.

## How to Manage Side Effects from Radiation Therapy

Treatment side effects differ from person to person. Below are some common side effects and how to manage them.

### Will I get tired while on treatment?

Fatigue (feeling very tired) is a common side effect of treatment. When fatigue will start varies with each person but often begins early in treatment. Fatigue can increase slowly during treatment. Fatigue usually gets better 1 to 2 months after treatment ends.

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

- Pace yourself with work or chores that make you feel tired.
- Ask for help with daily chores that you cannot manage.
- Pick something that helps you relax. For instance, walking or a hobby that you can do every day.
- Keep a regular sleep routine at night and rest as you need to during the day.
- Eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of liquids.
- Eat meals at regular times throughout the day and eat snacks if needed.

## **Will there be changes appetite (desire to eat)?**

Some patients may not feel very hungry while getting treatment. Chemotherapy (drug that treats cancer) and pain medicines may also lead to a loss of hunger.

### **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 appeal and interest you.
- Stock up on foods that are easy to prepare.
- Bring a snack when you come for treatment in case you feel hungry.
- Try not to drink too much with meals. Drinking too much may make you feel fuller, which can make you eat less.
- Drink plenty of liquids between meals.
- Light exercise and fresh air may help your hunger.

**Speak with your health care team if you would like to meet with a dietitian.**

### **Do these things if you have nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting (throwing up):**

- Eat 5 to 6 small meals throughout the day.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups of liquid throughout the day such as: water, ginger ale, clear soup or juice.
- Try plain or dry foods such as: toast, crackers, cereal, rice, noodles or boiled potato.
- Do not lie down for at least 30 minutes after eating.
- Eat cold or room temperature (around 20 degrees) foods.
- Take any prescribed anti-nausea medicine (such as Zofran) before your treatment.

**Speak with your health care team if you would like to meet with a dietitian.**

## **Will I have cramps and diarrhea?**

You may have cramps (stomach ache) or have diarrhea (watery poo). These side effects can start during the first week of treatment.

### **Do these things if you have cramps (stomach ache) and diarrhea (watery poo):**

- Eat what you normally do until you feel cramping or diarrhea.
- Eat foods that are low in fibre.
- Eat foods that are low in fat.
- Avoid milk products (lactose).
- Avoid caffeine and spices.
- Eat 5 or 6 smaller meals each day instead of 3 larger meals.
- Drink 8 to 10 cups of liquids each day to stop dehydration (not getting enough water).
- Medicines such as Imodium may help to control cramps or diarrhea. For more information ask your health care team for these pamphlets: "Eating Hints for People with Diarrhea" and "Guidelines for Managing Gas".

**Speak with your health care team if you would like to meet with a dietitian.**

## Will I get frequent and painful urination (peeing)?

You may have these symptoms because of treatment or because of a bladder infection:

- You need to pee often, even at night.
- You have pain or a burning feeling when you pee and find it harder to start peeing.

### Do these things to help with frequent and painful peeing:

- Drink plenty during the day.
- Do not drink as much 1 or 2 hours before you go to bed. Drinking less helps you pee less often at night.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine like coffee, tea and cola.

Talk to your health care team if these symptoms persist. There may be some medicine you can take to feel better. Your radiation oncologist may also order tests to check for a bladder infection.

## What changes to my skin can I expect?

You may have changes to your skin in the treatment area. Changes may occur in the groin and anus area. If skin changes occur:

- Your skin may change colour (such as red, or become slightly darker). Your skin may also feel **sore** (warm, dry and itchy) after the first 3 weeks of treatment.
- The skin in the area being treated will begin to heal about 2 to 3 weeks after you finish treatment.
- Take a Sitz bath. Sitz baths may help the skin around the groin area feel better. It may also prevent hemorrhoids from getting worse. Hemorrhoids happen when veins or blood vessels around your bum get swollen. Ask your radiation therapists or oncology nurse for the "Sitz Bath" information booklet. You can keep taking Sitz baths for a few weeks after your treatment ends. Sitz baths may help soothe your skin.

To learn how to care for your skin please see the pamphlet "Taking Care of Your Skin During Radiation Therapy."

### **Will my sexuality be affected?**

Cancer and cancer treatment can change the way you enjoy or have sex. Talk to your oncologist or nurse if you or your partner have questions.

### **Will I have other side effects?**

If you are also having chemotherapy, you may have a lower blood count. You may need regular blood tests if you are having chemotherapy.

**The side effects listed in this booklet are the most common ones. You may also have other side effects that were not listed. Sometimes the tumour and the treatment can cause the same symptoms.** Tell your health care team if you have any symptoms.

### **What if I am having trouble managing my side effects from treatment?**

If you need help to manage side effects, talk to your radiation oncologist or nurse during your weekly review visit. You can also talk to your radiation therapist at your treatment visits. You can also visit the Radiation Nursing Clinic (RNC) to manage your pain and symptoms.

#### **Radiation Nursing Clinic (RNC)**

Princess Margaret Cancer Centre  
Level 2B (behind main reception)

Hours: Monday to Friday, 8:00 am – 5:30 pm

**You do not need an appointment (visit) to be seen at the nursing clinic.**

## **What to Expect When You Finish Therapy**

Near the end of your treatment, we will give you a booklet titled “What to Do When Finishing Radiation Therapy.” At your final weekly review visit you will get a follow-up date for your next visit. This visit will be a few weeks or months after your treatment ends.

After treatment ends, some of your side effects will persist. The side effects 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 your radiation oncologist once you are finished with your treatment if you have any questions or concerns. You can also call the Triage line at 416 946 2220 if you have questions.

## **Other things that can happen after radiation therapy**

Some patients may need internal (inner) radiation treatment after they finish external (outer) radiation treatment. This is called **brachytherapy**. Your radiation oncologist will let you know if you need brachytherapy. Your oncologist will talk to you about this before your last day of external radiation.

Sometimes brachytherapy to the pelvis can cause the vagina to narrow. If this happens, you may need to use a vaginal dilator. A vaginal dilator is used to help stretch the vagina. You should use the dilator for about 6 months, or as long as your radiation oncologist tells you to. Your brachytherapist will teach you how to use the dilator after your internal radiation treatment is finished.

## **Where do I get more information?**

Please visit the **Princess Margaret Cancer Centre Patient & Family Library** on the main floor for information about treatment and services at the Cancer Centre.

Phone: 416 946 4501 extension 5383

Email: [patienteducation@uhn.ca](mailto:patienteducation@uhn.ca)

Website: [www.uhn.ca/princessmargaret](http://www.uhn.ca/princessmargaret)

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