

# What to Expect When Getting Radiation Therapy to the Pelvis (Rectal or Anal Cancers)

## Information for patients who are having radiation therapy

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

For more information on Radiation Therapy, please watch our [patient education videos](#). 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

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

Please talk to your radiation therapist, oncology nurse or radiation oncologist if you have trouble keeping your bladder full.

**You can expect to be here for about 2 hours for this appointment**

## What can I expect during my CT simulation 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.

The doctors, physicists and therapists will use the information to plan that your treatment.

## Do I need to prepare?

**The radiation therapists will explain this to you before your procedure. Please ask any questions you may have.**

**For the CT simulation, your bowel needs to be visible and you need a full bladder. To make sure you have a comfortably full bladder:**

- We will give you **2 appointment times** for your CT simulation scan.
- When you arrive at the first appointment, you will be asked to empty your bladder. A radiation therapist will give you 2 cups (500 mL) of water to drink. Finish drinking the water as quickly as you can.
- Do NOT empty your bladder after drinking. Your bladder will become full in time for your CT simulation scan (the second appointment) usually about an hour later)
- When your CT simulation scan is finished, you may empty your bladder.

After the CT scan you will need to have a **magnetic resonance image (MRI)** scan as part of your planning for radiation. Once we have your results, we will prepare a radiation treatment plan that is right for you.

## Your radiation therapy treatment

**For your radiation therapy treatment appointments, you must have a full bladder. Please follow the instructions below.**

Follow these steps **1 hour** before your appointment:

1. First, empty your bladder. This means urinate so your bladder is empty.
2. Right after, drink 2 cups (500 mL) of water, clear fluid or juice. Finish drinking these 1 hour before your appointment.
3. Do not empty your bladder (urinate) after drinking. Your bladder will become full for your appointment.
4. When your appointment is finished, you can empty your bladder (urinate).

**Please talk to your radiation therapist, oncology nurse or radiation oncologist if you have trouble keeping your bladder full.**

### **When do I get my first radiation therapy appointment?**

You will get a phone call a few days after your CT simulation scan with the date, time and place of your 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 happens at my radiation therapy appointment?**

Your radiation therapists bring you into the treatment unit and position you on the treatment table in your treatment mask. They check the measurements from your treatment plan. They 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 course of treatment?**

Plan to be at the hospital for 30 to 60 minutes each day. Your treatments take about 20 minutes. Most of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position for treatment.

## **Will I see the oncologist 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 therapy

### What changes to my skin can I expect?

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

To learn how to care for your skin please see the pamphlet [Taking Care of Your Skin During Radiation Therapy](#)

### Will I get tired while on treatment?

Fatigue (feeling very tired) is a common side effect of radiation therapy. This varies with each 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:

- Pace yourself, especially with activities that make you feel 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.
- Eat a balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids.
- 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?**

Some patients may not feel very hungry while receiving 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.
- Try not to have too much to drink with meals so that you do not fill up on fluids.
- Drink plenty of fluids between meals.
- Light exercise and fresh air may help your appetite.

**Please speak with your radiation therapist, nurse or radiation oncologist if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.**

## **Will I have nausea and vomiting?**

Please let your radiation therapists, nurse or radiation oncologist know if you have nausea or vomiting. The doctor may prescribe an anti-nausea medication for you if that happens.

### **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 your radiation therapist, nurse or radiation oncologist if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.**

## Will I have cramps (stomach ache) and diarrhea?

- You may have cramps (stomach ache) in your bowel or start to have diarrhea (watery stool).
- Having cramps and a lot of gas may happen 2 or 3 weeks after treatment starts. It's rare, but there may be blood in your stool.
- Inflammation of the rectum or anal canal can also happen if these areas are in the treatment area.

If at any time you have more trouble having a bowel movement or stomach pain that doesn't go away, tell your radiation therapist, oncology nurse or radiation oncologist.

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

- 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 instead of 3 larger meals
- Drink 8 to 10 cups of liquids each day to stop dehydration if you have diarrhea
- Medicines such as Imodium may help to control cramps or diarrhea (For more information please read pamphlets [Eating Hints for People with Diarrhea](#) and "Guidelines for Managing Gas")
- Sitz baths may help if you have a burning feeling with bowel movements
  - Sitz baths may help the skin around the groin area feel better and stop hemorrhoids from getting worse. To learn how to take a sitz bath, see the pamphlet [Taking Care of Your Skin During Radiation Therapy](#)

**Please speak with your radiation therapist, oncology nurse or radiation oncologist if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.**

## Are there other side effects?

The more common side effects are those we have described. For women, rarely there may be bleeding from the vagina.

**The side effects you learn about in this booklet are the most common ones. It is possible that you will have other side effects that were not listed above. Sometimes the tumour and the treatment can cause very similar symptoms.**

**Please tell your radiation therapists, oncology nurse or radiation oncologist if you have any other side effects.**

## 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 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 Princess Margaret 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 website at [www.theprincessmargaret.ca](http://www.theprincessmargaret.ca) for more information and resources about your treatment and also services at the cancer centre.

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