

# Moving oncology care forward so that you can look forward to life's moments

*How to prepare for radiotherapy and manage potential side-effects*



# How to prepare for radiotherapy and manage potential side-effects

## General treatment, side-effects and how to manage it

### Sore / painful skin

This usually occurs 1 – 2 weeks after treatment begins and normally settles within 2-4 weeks of the treatment finishing. Sometimes your skin may stay slightly darker, for some time after your treatment finishes.

### How does it present:

- Sore, red skin (similar to sunburn)
- Darker than normal
- Dry and itchy

### Tips and info to support you during treatment



Wash your skin everyday with mild, unscented soap



Pat your skin dry instead of rubbing it



Do not use perfumes, scented products or talcum powder in the treated areas



Avoid shaving and waxing (use an electric razor if you have to shave)



Wear loose-fitting clothing made of natural fibres



Avoid tight collars and shoulder straps



Avoid swimming in chlorinated water

### Fatigue (tiredness)

This usually starts during treatment and may continue for weeks or months after treatment finishes.



## Tips and info to support you during treatment



Get plenty of rest



Avoid doing tasks or activities that you do not feel up to



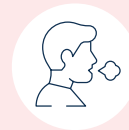
Do light exercise if you can (e.g. short walk)



Ask your friends or family for help with everyday tasks



Ask your employer for time off work or to let you work part-time during the treatment period



Tell your healthcare professional if you suddenly feel very tired and short of breath (this could potentially be a sign of anaemia, a lack of red blood cells in your bloodstream)

## Hair loss

Unlike chemotherapy, radiotherapy may only cause hair loss in the area being treated. It usually starts 2-3 weeks after treatment starts. The hair should grow back a few weeks after treatment finishes, although it may be a different colour or texture than it was before.

## Tips and info to support you during treatment



Ask your oncologist if you are likely to lose your hair and where on your body it will fall out



You may want to wear a wig or headscarf if you lose the hair on your head to protect your scalp against sunburn or temperature changes



Losing your hair can be upsetting, talk about it with family and friends to express how you feel



If you find it difficult to cope, consider finding a cancer patient group to attend and meet with others who have experienced what you are going through. You may want to make an appointment to see an oncology social worker or a psychologist

# How to prepare for radiotherapy and manage potential side-effects

## Feeling sick (nausea)

You may feel nauseous depending on the area being treated. This usually starts soon after your treatment starts and subsides once your treatment is finished.

## Tips and info to support you during treatment



Tell your healthcare provider as they can prescribe anti-nausea medicine to help



You should stop feeling sick soon after your treatment finishes



Try eating frequent small meals instead of three large meals

## Specific treatment area side-effects: Head and Neck

- Dry mouth
- Mouth and gum sores
- Difficulty swallowing
- Jaw stiffness
- Nausea
- Hair loss
- Tooth decay
- Lymphoedema

## Tips and info to support you during treatment



Avoid spicy, salty, or sharp foods



Ask your healthcare professional to recommend pain killers or mouthwash that can help



Take regular sips of water to relieve a dry mouth



Eat softer or liquid foods if you have difficulty swallowing



You may need to see a dietitian to ensure you are getting enough nutrients



Ensure good oral hygiene and follow a low-sugar diet to help protect your teeth



Speak to your doctor or dentist about fluoride treatments during and after radiation therapy and to recommend exercises to prevent stiffness in the jaw

## Specific treatment area side-effects: Chest

- Difficulty swallowing
- Breast or nipple soreness
- Shoulder stiffness
- Shortness of breath
- Cough, fever, fullness of the chest (inflammation of lung tissue due to radiotherapy)
- Radiation fibrosis (permanent lung scars from untreated pneumonitis)

## Tips and info to support you during treatment



Eat softer or liquid foods if you have difficulty swallowing



You may need to see a dietitian to ensure you are getting in enough nutrients



Take care of your skin as per *sore skin* section above



Gentle exercising and stretching regularly can help prevent joint stiffness



Tell your healthcare provider immediately if you experience any cough, chest fullness, shortness of breath



# How to prepare for radiotherapy and manage potential side-effects

## Specific treatment area side-effects: Stomach and abdomen

- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Bowel cramping
- Diarrhoea (loose stool)

## Tips and info to support you during treatment



Tell your healthcare provider as they can prescribe anti-nausea or anti-diarrhoea medicine to help manage your symptoms



Tell your doctor if you notice any blood in your stool



Try eating frequent small meals instead of three large meals



Try to eat healthily and maintain your weight during treatment



You may need to see a dietitian to ensure you are getting enough nutrients



You should stop feeling sick soon after your treatment finishes

## Specific treatment area side-effects: Pelvis

- Diarrhoea (loose stool)
- Rectal bleeding
- Urine incontinence
- Bladder irritation
- Sexual problems (erectile dysfunction / impotence)
- Low sperm counts
- Changes in menstruation
- Symptoms of menopause
- Infertility (men and women)



## Tips and info to support you during treatment



Tell your healthcare provider as they can prescribe anti-diarrhoea medicine to help manage your side-effects



Loss of libido tends to gradually improve after treatment stops



Speak to your doctor for treatment to manage vaginal dryness and stiffening



Speak to your doctor about erectile dysfunction treatments if the condition does not improve post treatment



Speak to your doctor to see if you can take hormonal replacement therapy for menopausal symptoms



Before treatment starts, speak to your doctor about options to protect fertility during cancer treatment

## References

- NHS. Side effects: Radiotherapy. [online] 2020 Feb 25 [cited 2022 Jul 18]. Available from: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/radiotherapy/side-effects/>
- Cancer.Net®. Side Effects of Radiation Therapy. [online] 2020 Aug [cited 2022 Jul 18]. Available from: <https://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/how-cancer-treated/radiation-therapy/side-effects-radiation-therapy>

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