

*If you have
any questions,
please ask your
physician or
nurse.*

Radiation Therapy to the Chest

You and your physician have chosen radiation therapy as part of your cancer treatment. This handout describes:

- What to expect
- How to care for yourself during treatment
- How to reduce side effects
- How to increase your comfort during treatment

Your physician will usually prescribe 25 to 33 radiation treatments. The radiation treatment itself is just like having an X-ray. It is not painful.

Treatment schedule

You will have treatments Monday through Friday (no weekends or holidays). Your therapist will work with you to set up daily appointment times. Each appointment lasts 15 to 20 minutes. Please allow an hour for these appointments. This will give you enough time for:

- X-rays
- Meetings with your physician or nurse
- Any unexpected delays

You will have X-rays as prescribed by your physician. This will help ensure you are in the right position on the table. Your care team does not use the X-rays to diagnose problems or check treatment effects.

You will meet with your physician at least once a week on _____ . They will check your treatment results and side effects during these visits. You will also have the chance to talk about any concerns about your disease and treatment at this time.

Common side effects

Cough

Radiation of the chest can irritate the lining of your airway. As a result, patients often develop a persistent dry cough or a productive cough (bringing up mucous and phlegm).

If you have a lot of mucous, avoid eating foods or drinking fluids that are very cold, which can make this worse.

Let your physician or nurse know if you have a cough that keeps you awake at night or interferes with your normal activities. Your physician may prescribe medication to help.

It is very important to tell your physician or nurse if you notice any blood in your sputum.

Skin changes

During radiation, you may notice some changes to the skin on your chest and your back. Your skin in the treated area may become dry and peel. Or it may darken in color or become red and irritated. To ease discomfort and protect your skin from more irritation, please follow these guidelines:

- Clean the area with unscented bath soap for sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are: Dove® for Sensitive Skin or Neutrogena® Unscented. Avoid soaps that are scented or antibacterial.
- Use lukewarm water. Hot water can irritate the skin the skin more.
- Use a soft cloth or your hand to gently clean the area. Pat your skin dry. Do not rub.
- Do not shave the area that receives radiation.
- Do not use heating pads or ice packs on the treated area. Extreme temperatures can cause more damage.

For clothing, choose cotton or soft knit fabrics. If you are concerned about changes in your skin, please talk with your physician or nurse.

Your physician or nurse may suggest a special cream to help moisturize the affected skin, such as Miaderm® or Aquaphor®. **Do not put this cream on your skin within 2 hours of your treatment, as it will make your skin more sensitive to the effects of radiation.**

Sore throat

When radiation is directed at the chest, it can cause a sore throat or esophagitis.

Esophagitis is an irritation of the lining of the esophagus (the tube that connects your mouth with your stomach). This may cause:

- A burning feeling similar to heartburn
- Discomfort or pain when you swallow
- A feeling like the food is sticking in your throat when you swallow

If your throat is so sore that you are unable to eat your usual foods, tell your physician or nurse. Your physician may prescribe medicine to help relieve the pain.

Try to eat foods that are high protein, high calorie, soft, and bland (such as mashed potatoes, yogurt, eggs, ice cream, apple sauce and pudding). The following may irritate your throat and may be painful to eat. Try to avoid eating:

- Foods with sharp edges, such as chips, pizza crust, dry toast or crackers
- Hot liquids, spicy foods
- Foods that are high in acid
- Alcohol

If you need suggestions about which foods to try and which to avoid, ask your nurse.

Nausea and vomiting

Let your physician or nurse know if you have any nausea or vomiting. There are different medications that your physician can prescribe for you.

Loss of appetite

You may have a loss of appetite during your treatment. This can lead to weight loss, weakness and fatigue, which can make it difficult for you to do your usual activities. If you have nausea, let your physician or nurse know. Your physician can prescribe medicine that you can take before meals to help relieve your nausea.

If you feel like you become full quickly, try eating 5 or 6 small meals instead of 3 larger meals during the day. **Try to avoid drinking liquids 30 minutes before you eat. Try not to drink fluids with your meals.**

Eat high protein, high calorie foods, such as cheese, whole milk, yogurt, eggs, puddings and ice cream. Your physician or nurse may suggest a diet supplement, such as Ensure[®], Scandishakes[®] or Boost[®] for added extra calories and protein. If you would like to learn more about your diet during treatment, your nurse can give you some suggestions or refer you to a dietitian.

Fatigue

Fatigue (extreme tiredness) is a common side effect of radiation treatment. Daily trips for treatment combined with the effects of radiation may make you more tired. Patients most often feel lower energy after about 10 treatments.

Staying active and keeping a regular sleep schedule can help improve energy levels. Try not to over-exert yourself. If you become tired, plan for rest periods during your day.