

If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, talk with your physician or nurse.

Radiation Therapy to the Head and Neck

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

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

Most often, your physician will prescribe 25 to 35 radiation treatments. The radiation treatment itself is just like having an X-ray. It is not painful, and you will not feel anything.

Treatment schedule

The treatments take place Monday through Friday (no weekends or holidays) over 5 to 7 weeks. Your therapist will work with you to set up daily appointment times, each lasting 15 to 20 minutes. While the actual treatments take only a few minutes, it is best to allow 1 hour for:

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

You will have X-rays as prescribed by your physician to make sure you are in the exact right position on the table. Your physician does not use the X-rays to diagnose problems or assess treatment effects.

You will meet with your physician at least 1 time a week on _____.
During these visits, your physician will check your treatment and side effects. You may discuss any concerns you have with your treatment during this time.

Common side effects

Skin changes

You may notice some changes to the skin in the treated area over time. After 2 to 3 weeks of radiation, your skin in the treated area may redden, darken, or become dry and irritated. Your skin may itch, burn or peel. If you are getting both chemotherapy and radiation, these changes may happen sooner.

Throughout the course of radiation, your physician or nurse will check your skin and prescribe the proper treatment. To ease discomfort and protect your skin from more irritation, follow these guidelines to care for the affected skin:

- Clean the area with a bath soap for sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are Dove® for Sensitive Skin, Cetaphil® or Neutrogena® Unscented. Avoid scented and antibacterial soaps.
- Use lukewarm water on the affected area. Hot water can further irritate the skin.
- Gently clean using the palm of your hand or a very soft cloth.
- Pat your skin dry. Do not rub.
- Do not shave the treated area.
- Do not use heating pads or ice packs on the treated area.
- Avoid exposing the affected skin to sunlight.
- For clothing, choose soft materials like cotton.
- You may apply moisturizing creams 3 times per day. **Do not apply any cream within 2 hours before your radiation treatment.** Here is a list of approved creams:
 - Miaderm® (available online)
 - Rejuvaskin® (available online)
 - Aquaphor®
 - CeraVe®
 - Cetaphil®
 - Aloe vera (without alcohol)

In some cases, your physician may prescribe other treatments such as:

- Silvadene® (an antibiotic cream)
- Domeboro® soaks (to help with dry and itchy skin)
- Steroid cream/ointment such as mometasone

Our treatment team **may** prescribe a topical steroid cream. **If prescribed**, start applying the steroid cream on your 1st day of treatment. Then, put 1 of the approved moisturizing creams on top. Apply the creams 2 times a day, once in the morning and once at bedtime.

How to apply the cream:

1. Apply a thin layer of the steroid cream to your treatment area **if prescribed by your physician.**
2. Let it dry.
3. Apply a moisturizer on top of the same area.

Please do not put any cream on your skin within 2 hours before your treatment. Doing so can cause your skin to be more sensitive to the effects of radiation. You do not need to scrub off creams that you applied more than 2 hours before.

Dry mouth

Sometimes radiation can cause the salivary glands in your neck and mouth to produce less saliva. You may notice that your mouth is very dry or your saliva has become thicker.

Both of these effects can make it difficult to swallow or to eat your usual foods. There are a number of different products that you can use to help keep your mouth moist and make eating easier. Some examples are Oasis® moisturizing mouthwash, Oral Balance Gel®, Xylimelt® lozenges or Biotene®. You can find these at most drug stores. You do not need a prescription. Your physician may also prescribe medications for your dry mouth. Please talk with your physician if you feel this would be helpful.

Problems with dry mouth may be short-term or permanent. Ask your physician how long this is expected to last.

Mouth sores

Depending on the area being treated and if you are receiving chemotherapy, you may get some sores in your mouth. These sores may be painful and make it hard to eat.

It is important to keep your mouth clean so that the sores do not get infected.

- Brush your teeth, gums and tongue after every meal with an extra soft toothbrush.
- If brushing hurts, soften the bristles in warm water. You can use the special fluoride trays prescribed by your dentist.
- Floss your teeth gently every day.
- Rinse your mouth several times a day.

During treatment, this salt and soda rinse may be soothing to your mouth:

Salt and soda rinse

1. Mix 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1 tablespoon of baking soda and 8 ounces of tepid water.
2. Rinse your mouth with this mixture after every meal.
3. Follow with a plain water rinse.

Other helpful tips:

- Avoid using toothpaste or mouthwash made with alcohol, as they can be painful to mouth sores.
- Avoid high-acid foods, such as tomatoes, citrus fruits and juices, as well as spicy foods.
- Try bland, soft foods that will not sting your lips or mouth.

If your mouth becomes sore and makes it hard to eat, let your physician or nurse know. Your physician can prescribe medication to help relieve the pain.

Taste changes

During your treatment, you may find that foods taste different. Around the 3rd week of treatment, you will likely lose your sense of taste.

This is temporary, but may last for several months after treatment is completed.

Loss of appetite

For many reasons, you may not feel like eating during your treatment. You may:

- Feel full after eating very small portions
- Have nausea or vomiting

Let your physician or nurse know if you have nausea or vomiting. They can prescribe medication that you can take before meals to help relieve your nausea.

If you find that 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 to 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[®], Boost[®] or Scandishakes[®], for extra calories and protein. If you would like more diet information during treatment, your nurse can give you some suggestions or refer you to a dietitian.

Sore throat

Radiation therapy to the head and neck may cause a sore throat. You may feel a burning sensation or discomfort when swallowing. If you find that your throat is so sore that you cannot eat your usual foods, tell your physician or nurse. They may prescribe medication to help to relieve the pain.

Try to eat foods that are soft and bland, such as mashed potatoes, yogurt, eggs, ice cream, applesauce and pudding. The following may irritate your throat and may be painful to eat:

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

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

Fatigue

Fatigue 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 decreased energy levels after about 10 treatments.

Staying active, such as going on regular walks, and keeping a consistent sleep schedule can help improve energy levels. Try not to do too much. If you become tired, plan for rest periods during your day.

If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, talk with your physician or nurse.