

Radiation Therapy to the Chest

You and your doctor 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 and increase your comfort during treatment.

If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, talk to your doctor or nurse.

Most often, 25 to 35 radiation treatments are prescribed. The radiation treatment itself is just like taking an X-ray. It is not painful; you will not feel anything.

Treatment Planning

Once the decision to proceed with radiation has been made, you will be scheduled for a planning session or a simulation. This session will last between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

During this session, your doctor will take X-rays that will help target the radiation treatment area.

Treatment Schedule

The treatments are given Monday through Friday. 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 an hour for:

- X-rays.
- Meetings with your doctor or nurse.
- Any unexpected delays.

X-rays are done weekly to assure the precision of your position on the table. The X-rays are not used to diagnose problems and do not assess treatment effects.

You will meet with your doctor at least once a week on _____.
Your treatment and side effects are checked during these visits. Any concerns about your disease and treatment can be discussed at this time.

Skin Marks

Often, permanent marks called tattoos are used to identify the exact location of the treatment area. These marks are freckle-sized and will not fade. You may wash your skin in this area as usual.

Sometimes, ink pen marks are used. To prevent the loss of these marks, clear medical tape is often placed over the ink. Do not remove this tape or the marks. Take care when you wash your skin so that you do not wash off the marks. If your marks start to fade, please tell your therapist. Do not redraw them yourself. If you are allergic to tape, tell your therapist or nurse.

Common Side Effects

Radiation is a very specific treatment. As a result, you can expect to have side effects only in the treatment area. The side effects are cumulative. This means that at first you will feel no effect but side effects will develop as you get more treatments. You can expect most of the effects listed below to start after 10 to 15 radiation treatments.

After your radiation is over, the effects will get slightly worse for the first 5 days. After the first 5 days, healing will begin and you will slowly start to feel better. Most side effects will be gone about 2 weeks after your last treatment.

Cough

Radiation of the chest can irritate the lining of the airway. As a result patients often develop a cough that may:

- Be a persistent dry cough.
- Cause you to bring up a good deal of mucous and phlegm.

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

Let your doctor or nurse know if you develop a cough that keeps you awake at night or interferes with your normal activities. Often, your doctor can give you some medicine to help.

It is very important to tell your doctor 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 a bath soap for sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are: Basis® for Sensitive Skin, Dove® for Sensitive Skin or Neutrogena® Unscented. Avoid soaps that are heavily scented or anti-bacterial.
- Use lukewarm water. Hot water can further irritate the skin.
- Gently clean the area with a soft cloth or your hand.
- Pat your skin dry. Do not rub.
- Do not shave the area that is being treated.
- Do not use heating pads or ice packs on the treated area. Extreme temperatures can cause more damage.
- Choose clothing made of cotton or other soft knit fabrics. Certain fabrics like wool may be irritating.

If you are concerned about changes in your skin, please talk with your doctor or nurse.

Your doctor or nurse may also suggest a special cream to help moisturize the treated area, such as Remedy® Skin Repair cream. **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.
- The food to feel like it sticks in your throat when you swallow.

If you find that your throat is so sore that you are unable to eat your usual foods, tell your doctor or nurse. Your doctor may prescribe medicine to help to relieve the pain. Take this medicine 30 minutes before meals.

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 so it is helpful to avoid:

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

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

Nausea and Vomiting

Sometimes, patients may develop some nausea with or without vomiting. This nausea may be persistent and make you lose your appetite. Let your doctor or nurse know if you start to feel queasy or vomit and at what times of the day it seems better or worse. There are many different medicines your doctor can prescribe for you that will prevent nausea. Some you can take before your treatment to prevent nausea.

Loss of Appetite

You may not feel like eating during your treatment for many reasons. You may:

- Be full after eating very small portions.
- Have nausea or vomiting and not feel like eating at all.

Not eating can lead to weight loss, weakness and fatigue, which can make it difficult for you to perform your usual activities. If you have nausea, let your doctor or nurse know. Your doctor can prescribe medicine that you can take before meals to help relieve your nausea. If cooking odors bother you, eat foods that are lukewarm or room temperature.

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 and try not to drink with your meals.**

Try to eat high-protein, high-calorie foods, such as cheese, whole milk, yogurt, eggs, puddings and ice cream. Your doctor or nurse may suggest a diet supplement, such as Ensure® or Boost® for added 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.

Fatigue

Fatigue is a common side effect, but varies with each patient. Stress about your illness, daily trips for treatment and the effects of radiation on normal cells may make you more tired.

Fatigue often begins after 10 treatments. It is often worse at the end of the week but seems to improve over the weekend. It may last several weeks to several months after your treatment has ended.

Plan activities early in the week, when energy levels are higher. Try to keep regular hours, getting up at the same time 7 days a week. Try to keep active and exercise if you can. It is important not to overexert yourself. If you become tired, plan for rest periods during your day.

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Alberto Culver Health Learning Center. This state-of-the-art health library is located on the 3rd floor of the Galter Pavilion. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Center by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nm.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312-926-3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Patient Representatives Department at 312-926-3112, TDD/TTY 312-944-2358 and/or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312-926-1920, TDD/TTY 312-695-3661.

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