

Radiation Therapy to the Brain

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

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

Most often, 10 to 30 radiation treatments are prescribed. 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 are given Monday through Friday (no weekends or holidays). 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 as prescribed by your doctor to ensure 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 treatment can be discussed at this time.

Common Side Effects

Radiation is a very specific treatment. It affects only the area where the beams are aimed. 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 the 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. Once radiation therapy is completed, your symptoms may last up to 7 to 14 days.

Neurological Effects

Please tell your doctor or nurse if you begin to have any of the following:

- Worsening headaches
- Vision changes
- Hearing changes
- Altered mental status (loss of alertness, confusion, memory loss, behavior changes)
- Changes in your balance

This could be due to brain swelling, a common short-term side effect. Your doctor may prescribe medications to decrease the swelling.

Nausea and Vomiting

Some patients may develop nausea with or without vomiting. Let your doctor or nurse know if you have any nausea or vomiting. There are medications that your doctor can prescribe for you.

Skin Changes

During radiation you may notice some changes to the skin on your forehead, ears and scalp. Skin in these areas may become dry, itchy, darker in color or reddened.

To ease discomfort and protect your skin, follow these guidelines:

- Clean the area with baby shampoo or bath soap for sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are: Dove® for Sensitive Skin or Neutrogena® Unscented. Avoid shampoo or soaps that are scented or anti-bacterial.
- Use lukewarm water. Hot water can further irritate the skin.
- Gently clean using a soft cloth or your hand.
- Pat your skin dry. Do not rub.
- Do not shave the area being treated with radiation.
- Do not use heating pads or ice packs on the treated area.
- For head coverings, choose cotton or soft knit fabrics.

If you are concerned about the changes to your skin, please talk to your doctor or nurse.

Your doctor or nurse may also suggest special creams or lotions to help moisturize your skin in the treatment area, such as Aquaphor® or Miaderm®. **Do not put any cream on your skin within 2 hours of your treatment, as this will make your skin more sensitive to the effects of radiation.**

Hair Loss

During radiation to your brain, you may start to lose hair after 10 to 15 treatments. Hair loss depends on the:

- Size of the treatment area
- Amount of radiation that is given
- Use of other treatments, such as chemotherapy

Your doctor or nurse will discuss with you if your hair loss is likely to be permanent. If the loss is expected to be short-term, you will start to see hair grow back about 2 to 3 months after therapy is completed. It may take 6 months to 1 year for maximum regrowth. You may notice a change of texture and/or hair color.

When you are outside, it is very important that you always cover your head to protect your scalp from sun and wind. If you are interested in a wig, please ask your nurse for resources.

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

Northwestern Medicine – Health Information Resources

For more information, contact Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Alberto Culver Health Learning Center (HLC) at hlc@nm.org, or by calling 312.926.5465. Health information professionals can help you find the information you need and provide you with personal support at no charge.

For more 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 312.926.6363 or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

Developed by: NMH Radiation Oncology