

Radiation Therapy for Cervical Cancer

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

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 and increase your comfort during treatment

Most often, 25 to 28 radiation (external beam) treatments are prescribed. The radiation treatment itself is just like having an X-ray. It is not painful; you will not feel anything. Also, you will have 2 to 5 brachytherapy (internal radiation) treatments. These will be done later in your treatment schedule.

Treatment schedule

The treatments are given daily Monday through Friday. Your therapist will work with you to set up daily appointment times, each lasting 15 to 30 minutes. While the actual treatments take only a few minutes, it is best to allow an hour for:

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

X-rays are done as prescribed by your physician 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 physician 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.

Common side effects

Burning with urination

Radiation can irritate your bladder and urethra (tube that carries the urine from the bladder out of the body). This can cause burning when you pass urine.

If you develop burning when you pass urine, increase your fluid intake. By drinking more, your urine contains more water and is less irritating to your urethra. If the burning persists, your physician may ask for a urine sample to test for a bladder infection. If you do have an infection, your physician may prescribe antibiotics. If there is no infection, your physician may prescribe some medicine that will decrease the burning.

Diarrhea

Part of your large bowel or colon may be in the treatment area. This part of your body is very sensitive to the radiation. As a result, abdominal cramping and diarrhea can occur. This effect usually is seen after 10 to 14 treatments.

To help decrease the radiation to your bowel, your physician wants you to drink 3 to 4 glasses (24 to 32 ounces) of water 30 minutes before each treatment to fill your bladder. When your bladder is full, it pushes up on your bowel and helps move it out of the treatment site.

If you have diarrhea, tell your physician or nurse. Be sure to contact them if you have diarrhea 4 or more times in a 24-hour period, as this can lead to dehydration. Your physician or nurse will suggest a low fiber diet. If your physician prescribes Imodium® A-D (loperamide hydrochloride):

- Take 2 tablets with the first loose stool.
- Then take 1 tablet after each subsequent loose stool.
- It is important that you not take more than 8 tablets a day.

Be sure to stay well-hydrated. During your treatment, you should drink at least eight 8-ounce glasses or 64 ounces of non-carbonated, non-caffeine fluids, such as water, juice or sports drinks daily. You may drink beverages with caffeine, but only in addition to the recommended guidelines for drinking fluids.

Skin changes

During radiation, you may notice some changes to the skin folds of your groin, vagina and/or anus (perineal area). Most often, the treated area may become dry and peel. Or, it may darken in color or become red and irritated. It is very important that you keep these areas clean and dry. Follow these guidelines to ease discomfort and protect your skin from more irritation.

- Clean the area with unscented bath soap for sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are Basis® for Sensitive Skin, Dove® for Sensitive Skin or Neutrogena® Unscented. Avoid antibacterial soap.
- 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. Extreme temperatures can cause more damage.
- For clothing, choose cotton or soft knit fabrics.

Many women also notice that the elastic in underwear can worsen the irritation to the skin folds in the groin. If this is a problem, try to wear loose underwear that does not bind or rub the skin, such as boxer shorts.

If the perineal skin becomes irritated and sore, stop using toilet tissue and use baby wipes or soft, damp washcloths to clean yourself after having a bowel movement. You may want to use a sitz bath (found at drug stores) to help clean your perineal skin.

Use a moisturizing cream, such as Miaderm® or Aquaphor®, 3 to 4 times per day to the area being treated. But, please **do not put these creams on your skin within 2 hours of your treatment, as it will make your skin more sensitive to the effects of radiation.**

You may also notice some loss of your pubic hair. This is a normal effect of the radiation. The hair will start to grow back after your treatments are complete.

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

Vaginal discharge

It is common for women to develop some vaginal discharge during radiation treatments. The discharge may be white or yellow and may be thick or thin. As needed, wear a panty liner. Tell your physician or nurse if you:

- Have a lot of discharge
- Notice that the discharge has an odor

This could be a sign of a vaginal infection, which would require medication.

While you may notice some vaginal spotting, you should not have heavy bleeding. If you develop bleeding that is heavier than a menstrual period, let your physician or nurse know right away.

Vaginal dryness and stenosis

Radiation treatments can cause scar tissue to develop in your vagina. This decreases the size and length of your vagina (vaginal stenosis).

Scar tissue is less elastic than normal tissue, causing a feeling of tightness. As a result, you may have discomfort during vaginal exams and intercourse. At your first follow-up visit, your nurse will give you a vaginal dilator and talk about its use. The dilator will help break up any scar tissue and help decrease the stenosis.

After your treatments are completed, you may also notice some vaginal dryness. Using a water-based lubricant, such as K-Y Jelly® or Astroglide®, can ease discomfort during intercourse.

After pelvic radiation, some women also report having a difficult time reaching orgasm. If you have any problems resuming intercourse, discuss it with your physician or nurse. They can refer you to a trained healthcare provider who can assist you with your sexual concerns.