

If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, talk to 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 and increase your comfort during treatment

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 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 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 vital signs and side effects are checked during these visits. Any concerns about your treatment can be discussed at this time.

Common side effects

Cough

Radiation of the chest can irritate the lining of the 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, try to avoid eating foods or drinking fluids that are very cold, which can make this worse.

Let your physician or nurse know if you develop a cough that keeps you awake at night or interferes with your normal activities. Your physician may be able to 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 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.

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 treated area, 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
- 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 physician or nurse. Your physician may prescribe medicine to help to 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, 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

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 perform 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 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 physician or nurse may suggest a diet supplement, such as Ensure[®], Scandishakes[®] 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 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.