

Radiation Therapy to the Head and Neck

You and your doctor 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

If you 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 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) 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 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

Skin Changes

During radiation you may notice some changes to the skin in the treatment area. After 2 to 3 weeks of radiation, your skin in the treatment 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 doctor or nurse will check your skin and prescribe the proper treatment. Commonly used creams are:

- Miaderm® (available online and at the hospital Walgreens)
- Aquaphor®

You may apply cream 3 times per day.

In some cases, your doctor may prescribe other treatments like the following:

- Steroid cream/ointment such as mometasone
- Silvadene® (a cream for burns)
- Domeboro® soaks (this helps clean and soothe the area before applying a cream)

Please do not put any cream on your skin within 2 hours of your treatment as it will make your skin more sensitive to the effects of radiation.

To ease discomfort and protect your skin from more irritation, follow these guidelines to care for the skin affected by radiation therapy:

- Clean the area with a bath soap for sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are: Dove® for Sensitive Skin, Cetaphil® or Neutrogena® Unscented. Avoid scented or anti-bacterial 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.

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®. These are found at most drug stores and do not require a prescription. Your doctor may also be able to prescribe medications for your dry mouth. Please talk with your doctor if you feel this would be helpful.

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

Mouth Sores

Depending on the area being treated and if you are receiving chemotherapy, you may develop some sores in your mouth. These sores may be painful and make it difficult to eat. It is important to keep your mouth clean so that the sores do not become 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, the following rinse may be soothing to your mouth.

SALT & SODA RINSE

Mix ½ teaspoon salt, 1 tablespoon of baking soda, and 8 oz. of tepid water.

Use this mixture to clean your mouth after every meal. Follow with a plain water rinse.

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 does become sore and makes it hard to eat, let your doctor or nurse know. Your doctor can prescribe medication to help relieve the pain.

Taste Changes

During your treatment, you may find that foods taste different. Around the third 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

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

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

Let your doctor or nurse know if you have nausea or vomiting. Your doctor 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.

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®, Boost® or Scandishakes® 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.

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 are unable to eat your usual foods, tell your doctor or nurse. Your doctor may prescribe medicine 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, spicy foods
- Foods that are high in acid

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 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.

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

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