

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

Radiation Therapy to the Pelvis

You and your physician have chosen radiation therapy as part of your treatment for cancer. 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 40 or more radiation treatments are prescribed. The radiation treatment itself is just like having 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) for 5 to 8 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 physician or nurse
- Any unexpected delays

X-rays are done weekly 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

Skin irritation

Radiation will cause the skin around your anus to become irritated. Itching, burning or pain in the area is common. It is very important that you keep these areas clean and dry. To ease discomfort and protect your skin from more irritation, follow these guidelines to care for your treated skin:

- 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 the palm of your hand.
- 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. Extreme temperatures can cause more damage.
- For clothing, choose cotton or other soft fabrics.

If the skin around your anus 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 the area. Your nurse can explain how to use a sitz bath at home.

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

You may use a special cream to help moisturize your skin in the treatment area, such as Remedy[®] skin repair cream. **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.**

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.

Diarrhea

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

Please drink 3 to 4 full 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. This will help decrease abdominal cramping and diarrhea.

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. Your physician may recommend 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.

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 have 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.

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 overexert yourself. If you become tired, plan for rest periods during your day.