

Radiation Therapy to the Prostate

You and your physician have chosen radiation therapy as part of your treatment for prostate cancer. 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 have any questions or concerns about your treatment, talk to your physician or nurse.

Most often, your physician will prescribe 25 to 44 radiation treatments. 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 take place once a day Monday through Friday (no weekends or holidays) for 5 to 9 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

You will have X-rays as prescribed by your physician to ensure the precision of your position on the table. Your physician does not use the X-rays to diagnose problems or assess treatment effects.

You will meet with your physician at least once a week on _____.
During these visits, your physician will check your treatment and side effects. You may discuss any concerns you have with your treatment during this time.

Preparing for treatment

Your radiation treatment targets the cancer in your prostate. It is important to protect the healthy tissue in this area of your body. Too much stool and gas can cause the lower bowel (rectum) to expand and be exposed to radiation. By having a full bladder and an empty bowel, you can lessen the treatment effects on the healthy tissues in your bowel.

Full 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 there are some days when you are unable to have a full bladder for treatment, this is OK. During the first few days of treatment, you will learn how much fluid your bladder needs to be full. You will also learn how much you can tolerate until after your treatment is completed. The following guidelines will help you prepare.

1. Empty your bladder 1 to 2 hours before treatment.
2. Drink 3 full 8-ounce glasses of water (24 ounces total) 30 to 45 minutes before the treatment to fill your bladder. There is a water machine in the department.
3. If your treatment is delayed, you may either empty your bladder and restart the process or simply stop drinking more fluids. This depends on the time of the delay.
4. Be aware of the time it takes to complete your treatment. Remember that you will have to wait to empty your bladder until you are assisted off the treatment table.
5. If you have a strong urge to pass urine while you are in the treatment room, let us know right away. We have urinals available for emergencies. For your safety, do not try to get off the treatment table alone. We will help you.

Empty bowel

The area treated for prostate cancer is very small. Any gas bubbles in your belly may cause nearby organs to move. This can change the treatment field.

Please try to have a bowel movement before each treatment. Your care team will take an image of your pelvis each day before treatment. If gas and stool are causing your bowel to expand, you will be asked to use the restroom to have a bowel movement and/or expel gas.

To prevent excess gas, it may help to follow the guidelines in the “Pelvic Radiation Diet Guidelines.”

Common side effects

Changes in urination

Radiation will cause irritation and swelling of your prostate. Your prostate is close to your urethra (the tube that connects your bladder to the outside of your body). When the prostate swells, it can put pressure on the urethra. This may cause you to have the following:

- Feeling of urgency and the need to pass urine more often
- Weak urine stream
- Feeling the need to push or strain to begin passing urine
- Feeling of not emptying your bladder completely

Burning with urination

Radiation can irritate your bladder and urethra. This can cause a burning feeling when you pass urine. If you feel burning when you pass urine, please let your physician or nurse know. Your physician may order a urine sample to check for an infection. The physician can prescribe medications to decrease the burning feeling. Drinking more fluids may also offer some relief.

Diarrhea

Part of your large bowel or colon may be in the treatment area. This part of your body is sensitive to the radiation. As a result, abdominal cramping and diarrhea can occur.

Tell your physician or nurse if you have diarrhea. Let them know if you have diarrhea 4 or more times in a 24-hour period as this can lead to dehydration. Your physician may recommend **Imodium® A-D (loperamide hydrochloride) to help the diarrhea. Each tablet is 2 milligrams (mg) and is taken by mouth.**

- Take 1/2 tablet (1 mg) with the first loose stool.
- If you continue to have diarrhea, take 1/2 to 1 tablet (1 to 2 mg) after each loose stool.
- It is important that you not take more than 4 tablets (8 mg) a day.

Diarrhea combined with the radiation can cause the skin around your anus to become irritated. We suggest that you use baby wipes or soft washcloths to clean yourself after having a bowel movement. It is safe to use any unscented lotion made for sensitive skin, such as Aquaphor® healing ointment.

Do not put these creams on your skin within 2 hours before your treatment. Doing so can cause your skin more sensitive to the effects of radiation.

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. Most people often feel decreased energy levels after about 10 to 15 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.

When to call your physician

Call your physician if you have these symptoms:

- Blood in your urine
- Pain or burning when passing urine
- Diarrhea 4 or more times in a 24-hour period

Go to the Emergency Department if you are unable to pass urine.