

Radiation Therapy to the Brain

You and your doctor 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

If you have any questions, please talk with a member of your care team.


Your doctor will discuss the number of radiation treatments with you. 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 Monday through Friday (no weekends or holidays). 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 doctor or nurse
- › Any unexpected delays

You will have X-rays as prescribed by your doctor to make sure you are in the correct position on the table. Your doctor does not use the X-rays to diagnose problems or assess treatment effects.



You will meet with your doctor at least once a week. During these visits, your doctor will check your treatment and side effects. You may discuss any concerns you have with your treatment during this time. They will check your vital signs and any side effects during these visits. You will also have the chance to talk about any concerns about your disease and treatment at this time.

Common side effects

Radiation is a very specific treatment. It affects only the area where the beams are aimed. As a result, you can expect to have side effects only in the treated area. The side effects are cumulative. This means that at first you will feel no effect, but the effects will develop as you get more treatments. You can expect most of the effects listed below to start after 10 to 15 radiation treatments. Once radiation therapy is completed, your symptoms may last up to 7 to 14 days.

Neurological effects

Please tell your doctor or nurse if you have any of the following:

- › Worsening headaches
- › Vision changes
- › Hearing changes
- › Altered mental status (loss of alertness, confusion, memory loss, behavior changes)
- › Changes in your balance


This could be due to brain swelling, a common short-term side effect. Your doctor may prescribe medications to decrease the swelling.

Nausea and vomiting

Some patients may develop nausea with or without vomiting. Let your doctor or nurse know if you have any nausea or vomiting. There are medications that your doctor can prescribe for you.

Skin changes

During radiation you may notice some changes to the skin on your forehead, ears and scalp. Skin in these areas may become dry, itchy, darker in color or reddened.



To ease discomfort and protect your skin, follow these guidelines:

- › Clean the area with baby shampoo or bath soap for sensitive skin. Avoid shampoo or soaps that are scented or anti-bacterial.
- › 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.
- › For head coverings, choose cotton or soft knit fabrics.

If you are concerned about the changes to your skin, please talk with your doctor or nurse.

Your doctor or nurse may also suggest special creams or lotions to help moisturize your skin in the treatment area. Apply them to the affected skin as directed by your care team. **Do not put any cream on your skin within 2 hours before your treatment. Doing so can cause your skin to be more sensitive to the radiation.**

Hair loss

During radiation to your brain, you may start to lose hair after 10 to 15 treatments. Hair loss depends on the:

- › Size of the treatment area
- › Amount of radiation that you receive
- › Use of other treatments, such as chemotherapy

Your doctor will let you know if your hair loss is likely to be permanent.

If the hair loss is expected to be short-term, you will start to see hair grow back about 2 to 3 months after therapy is completed. It may take 6 months to 1 year for maximum regrowth. You may notice a change of hair texture and/or color.

When you are outside, always cover your head to protect your scalp from sun and wind. If you are interested in a wig, please ask your nurse for resources.



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.

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

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