Radiation Therapy to the Head and Neck

You and your physician 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

Most often, your physician will prescribe 25 to 35 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 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 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.

Common side effects

Skin changes

During radiation you may notice some changes to the skin in the treated area. After 2 to 3 weeks of radiation, your skin in the treated 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 physician 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 physician 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 before your treatment. Doing so can cause your skin to be more sensitive to the effects of radiation.**

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

- 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 antibacterial 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®. You can find these at most drug stores. They do not require a prescription. Your physician may also prescribe medications for your dry mouth. Please talk with your physician if you feel this would be helpful.

Problems with dry mouth may be short-term or permanent. Ask your physician 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 and soda rinse**

- Mix 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1 tablespoon of baking soda, and 8 ounces 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 becomes sore and makes it hard to eat, let your physician or nurse know. Your physician can prescribe medication to help relieve the pain.

**Taste changes**

During your treatment, you may find that foods taste different. Around the 3rd 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 physician or nurse know if you have nausea or vomiting. They can prescribe medication 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 physician 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 physician or nurse. They may prescribe medication 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 or 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.

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