

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
- How to increase your comfort during treatment

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

Your physician will usually prescribe 25 to 40 or more radiation treatments. The radiation treatment itself is just like having an X-ray. It is not painful.

Treatment schedule

You will have treatments 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 appointment lasts 15 to 20 minutes. Please allow an hour for these appointments. This will give you enough time for:

- X-rays
- Meetings with your physician or nurse
- Any unexpected delays

You will have X-rays once a week. This will help ensure you are in the right position on the table. Your care team does not use the X-rays to diagnose problems or check treatment effects.

You will meet with your physician at least once a week on _____.
They will check your treatment results and 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

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 irritate the skin more.
- Use a soft cloth or your hand to gently clean the area.
- Pat your skin dry. Do not rub.
- Do not shave the area that receives radiation .
- 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 to help clean the area. (You can buy a sitz bath basin at most drug stores.) 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 folds in the groin. 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. 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, you may have abdominal cramping and diarrhea. This might happen after 10 to 14 treatments.

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 will push up on your bowel and 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 let them know if you have diarrhea 4 or more times in a 24-hour period. Diarrhea can lead to dehydration. Your physician or nurse may ask you to eat a low-fiber diet.

Your physician might prescribe the medication, Imodium® A-D (loperamide hydrochloride). Please follow these instructions:

- Take 2 tablets with the 1st loose stool.
- Then take 1 tablet after each loose stool after that.
- 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 8 full glasses (64 ounces) of non-carbonated, non-caffeine fluids, such as water, juice or sports drinks each day. You may drink beverages with caffeine, but only in addition to the recommended guidelines.

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 a burning feeling when you pass urine.

If you feel burning when you pass urine, drink more fluids. Drinking more fluids will dilute your urine. This will make it less irritating to your urethra. If the burning does not go away, your physician may ask you 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 medication that will ease the burning feeling.

Fatigue

Fatigue (extreme tiredness) 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 lower energy after about 10 treatments.

Staying active and keeping a regular sleep schedule can help improve your energy levels. Try not to over-exert yourself. If you become tired, plan for rest periods during your day.