

# DEALING WITH THE SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIATION THERAPY TREATMENTS TO THE ABDOMEN

---

**These are general guidelines only and are not intended to replace talking with your health care providers. Be sure to tell your doctor, nurse, or radiation therapist about any side effects that you notice.**

The side effects of radiation treatment vary from patient to patient. You may have no side effects or only a few mild ones through your course of treatment. The side effects that you have depend mostly on the radiation dose and the part of your body that is treated. Side effects may occur early or late. Early side effects occur soon after treatment begins and usually are gone within a few weeks of finishing therapy. Late side effects may take months or years to develop and usually are permanent.

Fortunately, most side effects will go away in time. In the meantime, there are ways to reduce discomfort. If you have a side effect that is especially severe, the doctor may prescribe a break in your treatments or change your treatment in some way. Be sure to tell your doctor, nurse, or radiation therapist about any side effects that you notice. They can help you treat the problems and tell you how to lessen the chances that the side effects will come back.

Some of the side effects from radiation therapy are at the worst when the treatment has been completed. It may take between 2-6 weeks for the side effects to start to improve.

## **Fatigue**

You may feel unusually tired, especially during the latter weeks of treatment.

How you can manage this side effect:

- Get rest by taking naps during the day
- Light exercise or physical activity can improve your energy levels
- Avoid caffeine or colas in the evening
- Ask for help with chores and errands from your family and friends
- Eat meals regularly to help keep your energy level up

What works for me:

---

---

---

## Skin Changes

Your skin in the treatment area may become warm, itchy or red - as if you have a sunburn. It may peel or become moist and tender. You may notice a loss of hair or decreased perspiration within the treated area.

How you can manage this side effect:



- Avoid rubbing, scratching or scrubbing the affected area.
- You may dust the area with baby powder or cornstarch.
- Do not put on any other ointment, cream, lotion or powder on the treated area unless your doctor has prescribed it.



- Wash with warm water and mild soap (e.g. Dove, Ivory, baby soap). Pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- Avoid prolonged contact with water; do not use bubble bath or oils.
- Do not put on cosmetics, shaving lotions, perfumes or deodorants on the treated area.



- Wear loose fitting and soft clothing against your treated skin (e.g. Cotton). Avoid belts or clothing that puts pressure on your waist and abdomen.
- Wear cotton underwear. Cotton boxer shorts may be a comfortable choice.



- Do not apply medical tape or bandages to the treated area.
- Do not put anything very hot or cold (e.g. heating pad or ice pack) on treatment area.



- Do not expose treated area to direct sunlight. Wear protective clothing to minimize sun exposure.
- After treatment avoid direct exposure of area to the sun and apply sunscreen, with a minimum of 15 SPF, if exposing area to sun.

What works for me:

---

---

---



## Nausea and Vomiting

Radiation therapy may cause nausea; this sensation often leads to the urge to vomit. If nausea (feeling sick to your stomach) occurs, it usually happens from two to six hours after your treatment and lasts about two hours. Nausea may or may not be accompanied by vomiting. You may experience a loss of appetite due to the nausea and vomiting. It is very important to continue eating well-balanced meals and avoid losing weight. If you do experience a loss of appetite, let your doctor know. The dietician can also provide advice to help you.

How you can manage this side effect:



- Eat several small meals a day including one before treatment
- Eat and drink slowly to aid in digestion
- Eat foods that are cold or are at room temperature
- Avoid foods that are hard to digest such as foods that are spicy, acidic, rough (e.g. nuts, chips)
- Rest after eating. If you need to lie down, keep your head elevated about 12 inches above your feet



- If you feel nauseous when you first wake up, keep a box of crackers on your nightstand and eat a few before getting out of bed. Or, try eating a high-protein snack such as lean meat or cheese before going to bed (protein takes longer to digest)
- If your doctor prescribes an anti-nausea medication for you, take it 30 minutes to 1 hour before eating and an hour before treatment



- Try to eat more food at a time of the day when you feel less nauseous
- Drink plenty of fluids (recommended: 8 glasses/day), especially between meals
- If you have been feeling nauseous or have been vomiting let your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist know

What works for me:

---

---

---



## Diarrhea

The lining of the bowel and stomach are very sensitive to radiation and may become inflamed during treatments. Your treatments may cause you to have, abdominal bloating or cramps, thin or loose stools, watery diarrhea, sense of urgency to have a bowel movement. The symptoms may start during the second or third week of radiation therapy. Occasionally, blood or mucus may appear in the stool

Notify your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist if you have diarrhea:

- More than two or three times per day
- With mucus or blood

Your doctor may prescribe medication for you. Also, the dietician may recommend some changes to your diet.

How you can manage this side effect:



- Avoid eating fibre-rich foods such as bran, nuts and whole grain cereals or breads
- Prepare warm food rather than very hot or very cold food
- Avoid eating spicy foods or foods that are high in fat
- Eat cooked, peeled or canned fruits and vegetables. Avoid fruits or vegetables with skins or seeds such as berries or grapes. Avoid cabbage, broccoli, corn and peas, as these vegetables cause you to have gas
- Eat small, frequent meals instead of three large meals

What works for me:

---

---

---



## Irritation

Your anal area may become sore because of frequent bowel movements. You may also experience itching, burning or pain during bowel movements

How you can manage this side effect:

- Try warm sitz baths (sit in a few inches of warm water in a bathtub)  
You may be instructed to add Epsom salts to the water
- Do not use bubble bath or bath oils in the water. Afterwards, pat the area dry (do not rub) with a clean, soft towel

What works for me:

---

---

---

## Feelings during Radiation Treatment

Having cancer and going through treatment may be stressful. At some points during your radiation treatment, you may feel anxious, depressed, afraid, frustrated, angry, helpless or alone. It is normal to have these kinds of feelings. If you are fatigued as well, it can make it harder to cope with these feelings.

How you can manage this:

- Light exercise such as walking may help to relieve stress
- The use of relaxation techniques and meditation may help you to feel calmer
- Try to keep a regular sleeping pattern
- Talk about your feelings with someone you trust such as a family member, friend, spiritual advisor or health professional
- Consider joining a cancer support group to meet and talk to other people who are facing similar problems. To find a support group please contact a social worker at the Cancer Centre or your Canadian Cancer Society Office
- Talk to your radiation oncologist, nurse or radiation therapist. They can refer you to a healthcare professional that is trained specifically to help with these types of problems

What works for me:

---

---

---

