

DEALING WITH THE SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIATION THERAPY TREATMENTS TO THE HEAD AND NECK

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, radiation therapist or dietitian 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 will become warm, itchy or red- as if you had a sunburn. It may peel or become moist and tender. You may notice a loss of hair or decreased perspiration within the treated area. You may also notice some swelling or drooping of the skin under your chin as well as changes in skin texture.

How you can manage these side effects:



- Avoid rubbing, scratching or scrubbing the affected area.
- You may dust the area with Johnson’s 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 put cosmetics, shaving lotions or perfumes on the treated area.
- Use only an electric razor if you need to shave within treated area.
- Do not put on medical tape or bandages on the treated area.



- Wear loose fitting and soft clothing against your treated skin (e.g. cotton)
- Do not put anything very hot or cold (e.g. heating pad or ice pack) on treatment area. Protect your skin in the treatment area from the wind.



- 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: _____



Sore Throat and Dry Mouth

The linings of your mouth and throat, as well as your gums are sensitive to radiation and may become inflamed or sore during treatments. You may experience: redness, irritation, and sores in the mouth, dry mouth or thickened saliva.

These symptoms occur during early treatment, often starting in the first week of radiation therapy. Although the symptoms may be severe, they are common and temporary -- they will subside gradually within 2 or 3 weeks of completing treatment. Meeting with a dietitian when you are on treatment is important so that you can get their help to manage any problems with your food intake.

How you can manage these side effects:



- Drink 6 to 8 glasses of fluid per day. You may want to carry a small bottle of water with you.
- Rinse your mouth with water before meals.
- Chew your food completely. Sip fluids frequently while eating to keep food moist and help with swallowing.



- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless hard candies .
- Gargle with club soda or drink fluids with lemon or lime to help "cut" thick saliva.



- Run a cold air humidifier in your main living area during the day and in your bedroom at night.
- Ask your doctor about artificial saliva or medications to prevent dry mouth.
- Avoid tobacco and alcohol.

What works for me:

Difficulty chewing and swallowing

The lining of your esophagus (food pipe) is sensitive to radiation and may become inflamed and sore during treatments. You may feel a burning sensation in your throat or chest or you may feel as if you have a "lump" in your throat. You may feel pain when swallowing and your jaw may also feel stiff. If you are having difficulty swallowing your medications, ask your



pharmacist which medications can be crushed, if it is safe to crush your medications, mix them with soft foods such as applesauce or pudding.

How you can manage these side effects:



- Sit upright at a 90-degree angle and lean your head slightly forward.
- Eat slowly. Cut your food into small pieces and chew it well.
- Eat small, frequent meals throughout the day instead of 3 large meals.
- Eat foods that are warm or are at room temperature. Avoid hot foods and drinks.



- Eat soft foods. Puree or finely chop cooked meats, fruits and vegetables. You may want to try commercial baby foods, which are nutritious, convenient and easy-to-swallow. High-protein milkshakes are also nutritious and easy to swallow.



- If you are experiencing a burning sensation when eating or drinking, try taking an antacid before your meals.
- If swallowing is painful, take pain medication prescribed by your doctor before you eat.



- Avoid eating spicy foods and crunchy foods, like chips and nuts.
- Avoid eating or drinking acidic foods and drinks like tomatoes, oranges, grapefruits and their juices. Instead, try nectars and imitation fruit drinks.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco.
- Jaw exercises may help ease stiff jaws.
- Avoid lying down for 15 to 20 minutes after eating a meal.

What works for me:

Changes in Taste and Decreased Appetite

Your sense of taste may change during radiation treatments. Different foods may seem to taste the same, have a slightly bitter taste or not have any taste at all. Meat often tastes funny after several weeks of treatment. Even when food tastes strange or different it is very important to eat well-balanced meals and avoid losing weight. Adding protein supplements to your meal plan usually becomes necessary when your sense of taste changes. A dietician can recommend a brand to meet your nutritional needs.



How you can manage these symptoms:

- If meat tastes bitter, soak it in sweet sauces, fruit juice or wine before cooking, do not do this if your mouth is sore.
- If you do not want to eat meat, make sure that you have another protein source in your diet -- try eating more fish, poultry, eggs, cheese and milk.
- Try eating foods that are warm or served at room temperature
- Choose foods that have mild taste or flavour (e.g. soft cheeses, fresh fruits, chicken, eggs, milder types of fish).
- Use mild seasonings such as basil, tarragon, mint.
- Drink flavoured nutritional supplements.
- Foods that are slightly chilled may be tolerated better, such as milkshakes, flavored gelatin, pudding and applesauce.
- Take a walk before meals; you may find that activity can increase your appetite.

What works for me:

Teeth and Gums

Good mouth care helps prevent dental problems and infections. If you are having radiation therapy in the area of your mouth, you should discuss dental care with your doctor. Radiation to the area of your mouth puts you at a greater risk for developing cavities and infections. Your gums are also sensitive to radiation treatment and they can become swollen and tender. If your gums become inflamed or sore during your radiation treatment, you may have difficulty wearing dentures. Often, dentures may have to be removed during treatment and refitted 3 to 6 months after your treatment is complete.

How you can manage these symptoms:



- Examine your mouth and gums daily. Your doctor may recommend that you see a dentist before your radiation treatments begin.
- Brush your teeth after each meal with a small, very soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste. Use foam sticks instead of a toothbrush if your gums are especially sore. Keep your dentures clean and fitting properly.
- Use dental floss every day.





- Avoid commercial mouthwashes or lozenges - they may irritate or dry your mouth.
- Prepare a gargle by dissolving 1teaspoon each of salt and baking soda in a quart of warm water. (A smaller portion of this can be made by stirring 1/4 teaspoon each of salt and baking soda into 8 ounces of warm water.) Rinse your mouth and gargle with this solution at least 4 to 6 times a day, especially after meals and before going to bed.
- Avoid sugary snacks that promote tooth decay.

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:

