

## DEALING WITH THE SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIATION THERAPY TREATMENTS TO THE LOWER (LUMBAR-SACRAL) SPINE

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**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, a few mild ones or some that cause you problems. The side effects that you have depend mainly on the radiation dose and the area of your body that is treated. Side effects may occur soon after treatment begins and usually are gone within a few weeks of finishing treatment. Fortunately, most side effects will go away in time and there are ways to reduce discomfort.

### **Fatigue**

You may feel tired when you are having treatment and during the first few weeks after your treatment is over.

How you can manage this side effect:

- Get rest when you need to. You may need to take short naps during the day.
- Eat a well balanced diet and eat meals regularly and use snacks to help keep your energy level up.
- Avoid caffeine or colas in the evening.
- Light exercise, such as short walks or light physical activity, may improve your energy levels.
- Try not to over exert yourself. Ask for help with chores and errands from your family and friends.
- Plan a schedule that is right for you and pace your activities

What works for me: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Skin Changes

Your skin in the area being treated may become warm, itchy or pink – as if you have sunburn. This may happen during treatment or up to 2 weeks after.

How you can manage these side effects:



- Avoid rubbing, scratching or scrubbing your lower back.
- Dust the area with Johnson's baby powder or cornstarch.
- Wash with warm water and mild soap (e.g. Dove, Ivory, baby soap). Pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- Wear loose fitting and soft clothing (e.g. cotton) against your lower back.
- Do not put medical tape or bandages your lower back.
- Do not put anything very hot or cold (e.g. heating pad or ice pack) on your lower back.
- Avoid direct exposure of your lower back to the sun.
- Do not use moisturizers within two hours before your radiation treatment.

What works for me: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Nausea and Vomiting

Radiation therapy may cause nausea (feeling sick to your stomach). If nausea occurs, it usually happens from two to six hours after your treatment. Nausea may be accompanied by vomiting. If you have been feeling nauseous or have been vomiting let your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist know. You may experience a loss of appetite due to the nausea and vomiting. It is important to continue eating well-balanced meals and try to avoid losing weight. The dietician can also help you, please ask your radiation therapist or nurse to arrange for you to see a dietitian.

How you can manage this side effect:

- Eat something light such as crackers or toast before your radiation treatment.
- If a doctor prescribed an anti-nausea medication for you, take must take it as instructed.
- Eat several small meals (5-6) a day.



- Avoid foods that are hard to digest such as foods that are spicy, acidic, rough (e.g. nuts, chips).
- Eat foods that are cold or at room temperature.
- Rest after eating. If you need to lie down, keep your head elevated at about 12 inches (30cm) above your feet and lie on your right side.
- Try to eat more food at a time of the day when you feel less nauseous.
- Drink plenty of fluids (recommended: 6-8 glasses/day) especially between meals.
- If you have been feeling nauseous or have been vomiting, let your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist know. Medication can be given to you to help improve your symptoms.

What works for me: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Diarrhea and Abdominal Cramping**

The lining of the bowel and stomach are very sensitive to radiation and may become inflamed during your treatments. Your treatments may cause you to have abdominal bloating or cramps, loose stools, watery diarrhea, or a sense of urgency to have a bowel movement. These symptoms do not always occur but if they do, they will probably happen towards the end of your treatment. They are usually mild with this type of radiation treatment.

Tell your radiation therapists, nurse or doctor if you have diarrhea, your doctor may prescribe medication for you. Also the dietician may recommend some changes to your diet.

How you can manage these side effects:

- Drink 8 cups of clear liquids a day.
- Avoid drinks that are high in sugar such as fruit juice or sweetened iced tea.
- Avoid eating fibre-rich foods such as bran, nuts and whole grain cereals or breads.
- Prepare warm or room temperature food rather than very hot or very cold food.
- Avoid eating spicy foods, foods that are high in fat or large quantities of milk products.
- Eat cooked, peeled or canned fruits and vegetable. Avoid fruits or vegetables with skins or seeds such as berries or grapes. Avoid cabbage, broccoli, corn and peas, as these vegetables may cause you to have gas.
- Eat small, frequent meals (5-6 meals) a day instead of three large meals.

What works for me: \_\_\_\_\_

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## 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, 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: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Things to Report Immediately

It is important that you tell your radiation therapist, nurse or radiation oncologist as soon as possible if you notice any of the following:

- A change in sensation in your arms or legs such a weakness, numbness or tingling.
- A sudden change of your bowel or bladder habits
- Weakness in your legs or a change in the way you walk.
- Increased pain in your back or band-like pain that wraps around your chest and/or midsection.

After 4:30 pm or on weekends dial 613 544 2630. The operator will take your name and telephone number and the radiation doctor on-call will phone you back.

In the case of an emergency, please go to your nearest emergency department.

