

DEALING WITH THE SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIATION THERAPY TREATMENTS TO THE MIDDLE (THORACIC) SPINE

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. Any side effects that you have depend mainly on the radiation dose and the area of your body that is treated. Side effects may occur early on or later. Early side effects occur after treatment begins and usually are over within a few weeks of finishing therapy. Some of the side effects from radiation therapy are at their worst after treatment is finished. It may take between 2-6 weeks for the early side effects to start to improve. 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, 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: _____

Skin Changes

Your skin in the area being treated may become warm, itchy or pink – as if you have mild 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 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 back.
- Do not put medical tape or bandages on the treated area.



- Do not put anything very hot or cold (e.g. heating pad or ice pack) on your back.
- Avoid direct exposure of your back to the sun.

What works for me: _____

Difficulty Swallowing and Heartburn

Radiation treatments can irritate the esophagus (food pipe/ swallowing tube), causing some discomfort and difficulty swallowing. It may feel that you have "lump" in your throat when you swallow or food is sticking in your chest and not going down. You may also experience heartburn or indigestion. This is caused by irritation of the lower portion of the esophagus.

How you can manage this side effect:

- Sit upright at a 90-degree angle and lean your head slightly forward.
- Avoid lying down for 15-20 minutes after eating a meal.
- 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 soft foods such as pureed cooked meats, fruits and vegetables.
- Drink more liquids.
- Avoid spicy, acidic, rough (e.g. nuts, chips) and very hot or cold foods.
- Avoid, or reduce your use of, alcohol and tobacco.
- If you have been having difficulties swallowing or heartburn that is not improving, let your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist know. Medications can be given to you to help improve your symptoms.



What works for me: _____

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 your 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: _____



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: _____

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 hands, 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.

