

DEALING WITH THE SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIATION THERAPY TREATMENTS TO THE PELVIS

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 these side effects:



- Avoid rubbing, scratching or scrubbing the affected area.
- Dust the area with Johnson's baby powder or cornstarch.
- Do not use 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 use cosmetics, shaving lotions, perfumes or deodorants on the treated area.



- Use only an electric razor if you need to shave within 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 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 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 15 SPF, if exposing area to sun.



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 your stool.

Tell your radiation therapists, nurse or doctor if you have diarrhea:

- more than 2 or 3 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 3 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 told 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:

Bladder Function

The lining of the bladder is sensitive to radiation and may become inflamed during treatments. Your treatments may cause you to feel pain or a burning sensation when you are urinating, the need to urinate frequently (often in small amounts), pressure or a sense of urgency to go to the bathroom (although you may have very little urine to pass). These symptoms may occur during the 2nd or 3rd week of radiation therapy but will subside gradually within 2 to 4 weeks after completing treatment. Occasionally blood may appear in the urine. Tell your radiation therapist, nurse or doctor if you experience any of the above symptoms. You may be asked to provide a urine sample. You may be prescribed a medication.

Effects on Male Fertility

Radiation to the pelvic area can have sexual and fertility effects on male patients. Common effects include dry ejaculate that usually lasts 1-2 months after treatment. There is a small risk that this may become permanent. If you are considering fathering a child, talk to your doctor or nurse about sperm banking.

Effects on Female Fertility

Radiation to the pelvic area can cause a number of effects for the female patient. You **must not** become pregnant during your treatment course. Let your doctor know if you are pregnant or intending on becoming pregnant so you can discuss options. Also, radiation may cause you to stop menstruating, become sterile or to have menopausal symptoms (e.g. hot flashes). Exercise, meditation and relaxation techniques may be effective for menopausal symptoms.



Sexual Relations

You may notice a decrease in your level of sexual desire. Female patients may experience vaginal itching, burning and dryness. You can manage this side effect by using water-based lubricants to make intercourse more comfortable, we recommend that you do not use petroleum jelly.

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:

