

DEALING WITH THE SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIATION THERAPY TREATMENTS TO THE UPPER (CERVICAL) 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. 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 any 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: _____

Skin Changes

Your skin in the area being treated may become warm, itchy or pink – as if you have a 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 neck.
- 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 (e.g. cotton) clothing against your treated skin to reduce friction.



- Do not put medical tape or bandages on your neck.
- Do not put anything very hot or cold (e.g. heating pad or ice pack) on your neck.
- Avoid direct exposure of area treated to the sun.
- Avoid shaving the treated area. If you must shave, use an electric razor.

What works for me: _____

Sore/Dry Throat and Difficulty Swallowing

Radiation can irritate the esophagus (food pipe/ swallowing tube), causing some discomfort and difficulty swallowing. Your throat may become dry and sore. This may happen during treatment or up to 2 weeks after.

How you can manage this side effect:



- Eat foods that have a moist soft texture (e.g. gravy, applesauce, soft ice cream).



- Drink plenty of fluids (6-8 glasses/day) and drink liquids with meals.
- Try sucking on sugarless mints and candies to better lubricate your throat.
- Avoid spicy, acidic, rough (e.g. nuts, chips) and very hot or cold foods.



- Avoid, or reduce, the use of alcohol and tobacco as they can irritate your throat. If severe, your doctor can prescribe medication for your sore throat.



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:

- Numbness, tingling, or loss of feeling in your fingers or toes.
- Weakness in your legs or a change in the way you walk.
- Change in your bowel or bladder habits such as being unable to empty your bladder or loss of bowels or bladder control.

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.

