

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

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 only a few side-effects through your course of treatment. The side effects 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: _____

Skin Changes and Hair Loss

Your skin in the treatment area, especially your forehead, may become warm, itchy or pink – as if you have mild sunburn. This may happen during treatment or up to 2 weeks after. You will notice the loss of hair on your scalp and possibly your eyebrows. Hair follicles are sensitive to radiation and you may notice hair loss two to three weeks after your treatment has started. You may find that your hair falls out slowly or may come out quite quickly. Your hair loss may be temporary, and your hair will start to grow back about eight to twelve weeks after your treatment is over, or it may be permanent. Once your hair starts to grow back, it may not look or feel the way it did before. Your hair may be thinner or curly and it may be a different colour.

How you can manage these side effects:



- Avoid rubbing, scratching or scrubbing the treatment area.
- Do not put on any other ointment, cream, or lotion on the treated area unless your doctor has prescribed it.
- Wash your hair very gently with warm water and mild, non-medicated shampoo such as baby shampoo.



- Avoid prolonged contact with water.
- Do not use hair dryers and curling or straightening irons.
- Do not use conditioners, hair sprays, gels, mousse or hair dye.
- Use only an electric razor if you need to shave your head.
- Do not put on medical tape or bandages on your head.



- 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 your head to direct sunlight. Wear a protective head covering to minimize sun exposure.

What works for me:



Preparing for Hair Loss

There are several things you can do to prepare for hair loss:

- You may want to try a shorter haircut or shave your head before your treatment starts to help you with the transition.
- Select head covers that will be comfortable for you such as turbans, wigs, hats or scarves.
- If you are thinking of buying a wig to get the best possible match get it before you lose your hair.
- Attend a "Look Good Feel Better" program for women, which are held at the Quinte Thousand Island Lodge every month.

What works for me: _____

Headache

You may get headaches after starting treatment. You must let your radiation therapists, nurse or radiation oncologist know if you:

- develop headaches
- if a pre-existing headache becomes more severe or frequent
- if the headache happens early in the morning
- you have nausea or vomiting with your headache.

These are **very important** symptoms which your doctor needs to know about as soon as possible.

If you are taking Dexamethasone (Decadron) you must be sure to take it as prescribed. This medication can help control the side effects of swelling from a brain tumour. Side effects from Dexamethasone may include increased appetite, insomnia, confusion and irritability. This medication should not be stopped suddenly and you need to slowly be weaned off it following the instructions of your doctor. You also need to carry on taking any prescribed anti-seizure medication.



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 tired 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 feel calm.
- Try to keep a regular sleeping pattern.
- Talk about your feelings with someone you trust such as a family member, friend, spiritual advisor or doctor.
- 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 get you to see a healthcare professional that is trained specifically in helping 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 vision, hearing, speech or the way that you walk.
- A change in sensation in your face chest, arms or legs such a weakness, numbness or tingling.
- A sudden change of your bowel or bladder habits.
- Seizures or blackouts.
- Early morning or headaches associated with nausea or vomiting.

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.

