Managing Side Effects of Palliative Radiation Therapy

In this booklet you will learn about:

- Common side effects when you receive palliative radiation therapy
- Tips on managing these side effects
- Where to get help

More information at www.rvh.on.ca
Radiation Side Effects

The goal of palliative radiation is to help relieve symptoms caused by the cancer. Sometimes the radiation itself can cause some short-term side effects. These side effects can vary from person to person, depending on where and how much radiation you receive. These side effects may also be affected by other treatments that you had or are currently having, such as surgery, chemotherapy, or pain medications. This booklet talks about the most common side effects related to your radiation treatments and helpful tips to manage those side effects.

General Side Effects

Radiation Skin Reactions

Radiation can cause some redness, irritation and itchiness of the skin in the area being treated. Some dry peeling of the skin may occur. Usually the skin reaction is quite mild, but Glaxal Base® or Lubriderm® cream (without lanolin) can be used to help with any skin reaction.

Pain

If you are in a lot of pain, you should take your short acting ("breakthrough") pain medication before your radiation appointments. If you still have pain after taking your pain medication, please speak with a member of your Care Team (radiation oncologist, radiation nurse, or radiation therapist).
Pain Flare

When radiation is used to control pain in your bones, it may cause an initial increase in pain before the pain decreases. This flare up (called pain flare) of pain usually occurs within the first 3 days after your first treatment, and may last up to 3 days. Please take more of your short acting breakthrough pain medications during your pain flare. Please speak with a member of your Care Team if you need more pain medication during this time.

Fatigue (tiredness)

Fatigue is a general feeling of tiredness. Fatigue is a common side effect of cancer treatment. Not everyone experiences fatigue, but for those who do it is generally mild to moderate and may start 1-2 weeks after starting treatment.

Fatigue can be caused by:

- The cancer.
- Treatment including radiation and chemotherapy.
- The travel involved in coming for daily treatments.
- The change in your daily schedule.
- The amount of sleep that you get.
- Overall level of physical activity.
- Medications.
- Anxiety.

Things you can do:

- Light exercise, such as walking.
- Take frequent rests during the day, but limit naps to less than 1 hour so you can still sleep at night.
• Eat a well-balanced diet. Talk to a dietician for more tips on what to eat. Call 705-728-9090 x43520 for an appointment.
• Drink lots of fluids during treatment. If you have fluid restrictions, talk to your doctor about other ways to stay hydrated.
• Ask family and friends for help with daily activities or chores.
• See a social worker for help with managing your anxiety. Call 705-728-9090 x43520 for an appointment.

The tiredness from the treatments will start to improve about 2 weeks after treatment has been completed.

**Side Effects of Radiation to the Brain**

**Headaches**

Headaches can occur shortly after starting radiation treatment to the brain. Your radiation oncologist may give you a corticosteroid drug to take during your treatment and for several days to weeks after your last treatment. Take the corticosteroid drug as directed.

If you are having headaches, speak with a member of your Care Team immediately. Call us at 705-728-9090 x43365

**Nausea and Vomiting** – see Abdomen section, page 6

**Hair Loss**

1-2 weeks after your first radiation treatment, you may notice hair loss in the area that has been treated. The hair loss may occur as a gradual thinning of your hair, but can
also come out more quickly. The amount of hair loss is dependent on the amount of radiation you receive. It may take several months for your hair to start growing back, and when it does, the texture and colour of it can be different than before. For some patients the hair never fully returns.

Although it is not possible to prevent hair loss, here are some tips to help you cope:

- Be gentle with your hair. Avoid excessive brushing, use a mild shampoo, and avoid using products that might damage your hair (for example: hair dryer, curling iron, hairspray, hair colour).
- Find a good hair cover that you feel comfortable with, such as a turban, hat, wig, or scarf.
- If you have longer hair, cut your hair shorter before your CT simulation appointment. This won’t prevent any hair loss, but may help to make the change less dramatic.

Changes in Feeling or Movement

Please speak with a member of your Care Team immediately if you experience:

- A change in vision, hearing, or speech.
- A change in feeling in your face, trunk, arms, or legs, such as weakness, numbness, or tingling.
- Any sudden change in bowel or bladder habits.
- Unsteady walk.
- Dizziness, seizures or “blackouts”.

Call us at 705-728-9090 x43365. Mon—Fri 8 am—4 pm.

If symptoms happen after hours and on weekends, go to your nearest emergency department right away.
Side Effects of Radiation to the Abdomen

Nausea & Vomiting

Radiation to the brain or abdomen may cause nausea and vomiting, which can happen within a few hours after your first treatment. Your radiation oncologist may give you an anti-nausea medication to help with this. It is important to take the anti-nausea medication as directed.

Usually anti-nausea medications are taken an hour before the radiation treatments. If you have any questions about how to take your medication, please speak to a member of your Care Team.

Things you can do:

- Eat small frequent meals.
- Avoid foods that are spicy, fatty, overly sweet, or that have a strong smell.
- Sip on cool liquids, such as water, juice or other caffeine-free liquids throughout the day.
- Try eating soda crackers or dry toast.
- Fresh air can be helpful.
- If you are vomiting, it is important to stay hydrated, so be sure to drink small frequent sips of clear fluids. Sucking on ice chips and popsicles can also be helpful to increase fluid intake.
Side Effects of Radiation to the Chest

Dry Cough

Radiation to the chest may cause irritation to your trachea (windpipe) and airways, which may cause an increase in dry coughing.

Things you can do:

- Drink fluids throughout the day.
- Avoid cough syrup, unless approved by your radiation oncologist.
- Avoid drinking alcohol and smoking, as these may cause further irritation.

If you cough up blood please tell a member of your Care Team immediately. Call 705-728-9090 x43365.

Sore Throat and Difficulty Swallowing

If the radiation treatment area is close to your esophagus (swallowing tube), you may experience a sore throat and/or difficulty swallowing. You may develop pain with swallowing or a feeling that the food is getting “stuck” in your throat or chest.

Things you can do:

- Avoid dry or spicy foods.
- Use sauces and gravies to make the food easier to swallow.

See next page for more tips ->
• Choose foods with a softer texture, such as yogurt, mashed potatoes, cream soups, pudding, or cooked cereal.

• Avoid sour or acidic foods, such as pickles and citrus fruits.

• Eat food at room temperature; avoid excessively hot or cold foods.

• Avoid alcohol and smoking, as these tend to dry out the lining of the mouth and throat.

• Eat small amounts of food throughout the day.

• Take your pain medication as directed.

• Use your mouth rinse as directed.

For more information on managing the side effects of radiation therapy please speak with a member of your Care Team (radiation therapist, primary nurse or radiation oncologist). You may experience other side effects related to your radiation treatments that are not discussed in this pamphlet. Please speak with your radiation oncologist as needed.