Managing Acute Side Effects of Prostate Radiation Therapy

In this booklet you will learn about:

- Common side effects when you receive radiation therapy to your prostate
- Tips on managing these side effects
- Where to get help
**Radiation Side Effects**

Side effects caused by radiation therapy to the prostate may vary from person to person. These side effects may be affected by other treatments, such as surgery and/or hormonal therapy and may be experienced to varying degrees. In this booklet, we have listed some of the more common side effects and helpful tips to manage them. Please speak to your Care Team if you have any questions.

**Where Can These Side Effects Occur?**

Below is a diagram to help explain the parts of your body that may experience side effects from your radiation treatment.
**Effects on the Bowel**

A small amount of your bowel may be in part of the treatment area and can become irritated by the radiation.

As a result you may have:

- Gas
- Cramps
- More frequent bowel movements
- Urgency (sudden need to empty your bowels)
- Diarrhea and/or
- Rectal bleeding

These side effects may start around the second week of your radiation therapy treatments and can continue for the remainder of your treatment and for about 4-8 weeks after your treatments are complete. You may also have difficulty telling whether or not you need to pass gas or stool.

**Frequent Bowel Movements**

As the lining of your bowel becomes irritated by the radiation treatments, you may notice a change in the number of times you need to empty your bowels daily. If this is happening, please speak to your Care Team on how to manage this.

**Diarrhea, Cramping and Gas**

As your radiation treatments continue, you may notice an increase in loose and watery stools, as well as cramping and gas.
Things you can do for diarrhea, cramping and gas:

- Drink more fluids daily to keep your body hydrated
- Limit drinks with caffeine or alcohol
- Adjust your diet:
  - Cut back on high fibre foods such as whole grains, nuts and seeds
  - Remove skins, seeds and membranes from vegetables and fruits
  - Limit green leafy vegetables, corn, broccoli, beans, peas, legumes, berries and dried fruits
  - Eat small, frequent meals and snacks
  - Avoid deep fried or greasy foods
- Speak with our Dietitian or a member of your Care Team for more tips

Tell your Care Team if you are experiencing diarrhea, cramping and/or gas.

Effects on the Perineum

The perineum is the area between the thighs and around the anus. This area can become irritated by the radiation, causing:

- Skin changes in the treatment area (feeling tender, sensitive and/or itchy)
- Sore/inflamed anus
- Worsening of any pre-existing hemorrhoids
- Tenesmus (feeling that you frequently need to pass stool)
These side effects may start around the second week of your radiation therapy treatments and can continue for the remainder of your treatment and for about 4-8 weeks after your treatments are complete.

**Things you can do when washing:**
- Use lukewarm water
- Use a mild, unscented soap for sensitive skin
- Avoid rubbing or scrubbing the area
- Pat dry with a soft towel
- Take 3-4 sitz baths per day – please ask your Care Team for more information on sitz baths

**Things to avoid:**
- Tight or ill fitting clothes that cause friction on the skin
- Hot tubs, saunas and chlorinated pools
- Swimming in lakes

**Effects on the Bladder**

The lining of your bladder may become irritated by the radiation as well.

As a result you may have:
- Pain or burning when you urinate
- A feeling that you need to urinate frequently and/or urgently (both during the day and at night)
- A slower urine stream and/or
- Blood in your urine

These side effects may start around the second week of your radiation therapy treatments and can continue for the remainder of your treatment and for about 4-8 weeks after your treatments are complete.
Things you can do for your bladder:

- Empty your bladder and then immediately drink 2 cups (500 ml) of water 1 hour before your radiation appointment times.
  - This will fill your bladder, moving it away from the prostate which means a smaller amount of your bladder will be affected by the radiation
- Increase the amount of fluids you drink during the day (before 7:00 pm)
- Limit the amount of fluids you drink in the evening (after 7:00 pm)
- Avoid spicy foods, caffeine, alcohol and smoking
- Try to empty your bladder often
- Drink 2 cups of pure cranberry juice each day

Hair Loss

You may lose some or all of your pubic hair starting about 2 – 3 weeks after your first radiation treatment. Your pubic hair may or may not grow back. If it does, you will notice it starting to grow back 2 to 3 months after your last radiation treatment.

Sexual Function

Radiation treatments may affect sexual function and feelings. You can continue to have sexual intercourse during your radiation treatment, but you and your partner should take precautions to prevent pregnancy. If you have any concerns, please discuss them with your Radiation Oncologist or Primary Nurse.
Fatigue is a general feeling of tiredness. Fatigue is a common side effect of radiation treatments regardless of the area of your body being treated. Not everyone experiences fatigue. For those who do, it is generally mild to moderate, and may start 2-4 weeks after the first treatment.

**Fatigue can also be caused by:**
- The physical effects of your radiation treatment
- The travel involved in coming for daily treatments
- The change in your daily schedule
- Hormonal therapy

**Things you can do:**
- Light exercise, such as walking
- Take frequent rests during the day
- Eat a well-balanced diet (avoiding foods high in fiber)
- Drink 6 – 8 cups (250 ml each) of fluids daily. If for any reason you have fluid restrictions, please discuss them with your physician.
- Ask family and friends for help with daily activities or chores

The tiredness will start to improve about 2 weeks after treatment is complete and may take up to a few months to resolve.

Continued on page 8 (turn over)...
You may have other side effects or long term side effects related to your radiation treatment that are not discussed in this pamphlet. For more information on managing the side effects of radiation therapy please speak with a member of your Care Team.

For More Information

Prostate Cancer Canada www.prostatecancer.ca
Canadian Cancer Society www.cancer.ca