

# Managing Side Effects of Colorectal & Anal Radiation Therapy

## In this booklet you will learn about:

- Common side effects when you receive radiation therapy to your colon, rectum and/or anus
- Tips on managing these side effects
- Where to get help

Hudson Regional  
Cancer Program  
North Simcoe Muskoka



Royal Victoria  
Regional Health Centre



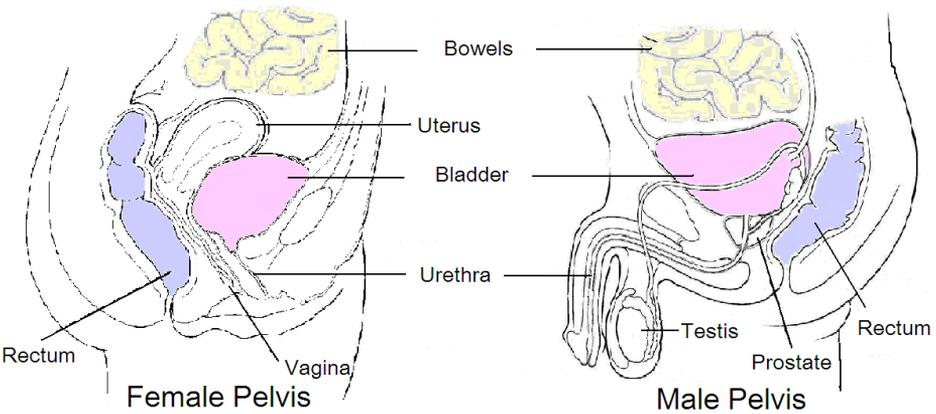
Ontario  
Health

# ***Radiation Side Effects***

Side effects caused by radiation therapy to the colon, rectum and/or anus may vary from person to person. These side effects may be affected by other treatments, such as surgery, chemotherapy, and medications. In this booklet, we have listed some of the more common side effects and helpful tips to manage them. The majority of these side effects may start near the end of the second week of your radiation therapy treatments and may continue for the remainder of your treatment and for about 2-4 weeks after your treatments are complete. You may experience other side effects related to your radiation treatment that are not discussed in this pamphlet. For more information, please speak to a member of your Care Team.

## ***Where Can These Side Effects Occur?***

Below are drawings 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 part of the area being treated 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

### **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.

### **Diarrhea**

**Tell a member of your treatment team if you are experiencing diarrhea.**

As your radiation treatments continue, you may notice an increase in loose and watery bowel movements.

## ***Effects on the Bowel (continued)***

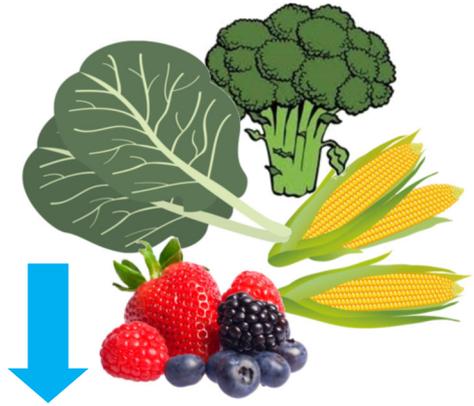
**If you are having diarrhea, here are some things to try:**

Drink more fluids daily to keep your body hydrated. If you have fluid restrictions, discuss this with your doctor.

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.
- Cut back on green leafy vegetables, corn, broccoli, beans, peas, legumes, berries and dried fruits.



If you are having diarrhea, it may be helpful to eat less of 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. You can make an appointment to see a dietitian by calling (705)728-9090 x43520.

Over the counter medications, such as Imodium<sup>®</sup> (loperamide) may be used.

- Follow the directions on the box for Imodium<sup>®</sup>.
- If diarrhea continues after you have used Imodium<sup>®</sup>, tell your Care Team.



**Tell your Care Team or call the symptom support telephone service right away**

(see the back of this pamphlet for details) if you have the following symptoms:

- Darkening of urine (pee)
- A decrease in the amount of your urine
- Lightheadedness

These might be signs of dehydration, and may need treatment.



## ***Effects on the Perineum***

**Tell your Care Team if you are having side 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
- Pre-existing hemorrhoids to get worse
- Tenesmus (feeling that you frequently need to pass stool, causing pain, straining and cramping in the rectal area)

## **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, or use a hairdryer on the COOL setting, or a fan

Please ask your Care Team about a sitz bath if your skin feels irritated.

## **Things to avoid until four weeks after your last radiation treatment:**

- Tight or ill fitting clothes that cause friction on the skin
- Using creams in the affected area (unless advised by your Care Team)
- Hot tubs, saunas and chlorinated pools
- Swimming in lakes

## ***Effects on the Bladder***

**Tell your Care Team or call the symptom support telephone service (see the back of this pamphlet for details) if you are experiencing any changes in your urine, as a urine sample may be needed to rule out a urinary bladder infection.**

The lining of your bladder can become irritated by radiation.

### **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

### **If you are having bladder-related symptoms, things you can do:**

- Increase the amount of clear 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

## ***Loss of Appetite***

Eating well plays an important role in feeling good and coping with side effects. Sometimes people experience a loss of appetite while receiving cancer treatments.

### **If you have a loss of appetite, things you can do:**

- Eat small, frequent meals throughout the day, even if you're not hungry.



Light exercise and fresh air may help increase your appetite.



Aside from drinking water, try fluids rich in nutrients such as milk, cream soups, juice or meal supplements.

- Eat foods that you enjoy.
- Drink more fluids. If for any reason you have fluid restrictions, you should discuss this with your doctor.
- Speak with our dietitian or a member of your Care Team for more tips. You can make an appointment to see a dietitian by calling 705-728-9090 x43520.

# ***Fatigue***

Fatigue is a general feeling of tiredness. Fatigue is a common side effect of cancer treatment. Not everyone will have fatigue, but for those who do, it is usually mild to moderate.

## **Fatigue can be caused by:**

- The cancer
- Treatments including radiation, chemotherapy, and medications
- The travel involved in coming for treatments
- The change in your daily schedule
- The amount of sleep that you get
- Less food and/or fluid intake
- Lack of physical activity and exercise
- Pain, depression, or anxiety



Your medications may cause fatigue.

## **Things you can do for fatigue:**

- Light exercise, such as walking
- Take frequent rests during the day
- Try a relaxing activity to reduce stress



Light exercise such as walking may help with fatigue.

## Things you can do for fatigue: (continued...)

- Drink more fluids daily to keep your body hydrated. If you have fluid restrictions, discuss this with your doctor.
- Ask family/friends for help with daily activities or chores

The tiredness may start to improve about 2 weeks after treatment is complete, depending on the cause, and may take up to a few months to resolve.

## ***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. The **Sexual Health, Intimacy and Cancer (SHIC) Clinic** is also available to you and/or your partner to address and support your sexual health concerns. You can make an appointment by calling 705-728-9090 x43520.



## ***Help is a Phone Call Away***

**If you are having side effects related to your cancer treatment, please contact:**

### **Symptom Support Telephone Service**



**During the day:  
Cancer Centre Symptom Support  
705-728-9090 x43333**



**Evenings, weekends and holidays:  
CareChart 1-877-681-3057**

Please visit [www.rvh.on.ca](http://www.rvh.on.ca) for the latest information and hours of operation.

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