

Managing Side Effects of Brain Radiation Therapy

In this booklet you will learn about:

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

Simcoe Muskoka
Regional Cancer Program



Royal Victoria
Regional Health Centre

A Cancer Care Ontario Partner



Radiation Side Effects

Side effects caused by radiation therapy to the brain 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. 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.

Changes in Feeling or Movement

If you are having:

- 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”.



Please contact the symptom support hotline right away (see back of pamphlet for details).

Headaches

If you are getting headaches, please tell a member of your Care Team right away or call the Symptom Support Telephone Service (see back of pamphlet for details).

Headaches can occur shortly after starting radiation treatment to the brain. You may be prescribed a steroid medication to take over the course of your treatment and for a number of days following your last appointment. It is important to take the medication as directed.

Nausea & Vomiting

Radiation to the brain 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.

More on next page...

Nausea & Vomiting

If you are having nausea and/or vomiting, things you can do:

- Eat smaller meals more often, instead of a big meal.
- 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.

- Get some fresh air if you can.
- If you are vomiting, it is important to stay hydrated. Drink small frequent sips of clear fluids. Sucking on ice chips and popsicles can also help.

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 depends 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.

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

- Be gentle with your hair. Avoid brushing your hair too much. Use a mild shampoo.
- Find a good hair cover that you feel comfortable with, such as a turban, hat, wig, or scarf.



Try to avoid using products that might damage your hair (for example: hair dryer, curling iron, hairspray, hair colour).



If you have longer hair, you might want to 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.

Skin Reaction

The skin in the treatment area reacts over time to radiation and most patients may notice changes at about the second week of treatment. At that time your skin may look slightly pink, may start to feel dry, itchy, sensitive and/or tender. The skin reaction will be at its peak at about 10-14 days after all your treatments are complete.

How to Take Care of Your Skin During Treatment:

- Be gentle with your skin when washing; avoid scrubbing or scratching the area
- If there is no hair in the area, apply Lubriderm® (unscented, lanolin free) or Glaxal Base® cream to the treatment area at least twice a day. Make sure cream is absorbed prior to treatment. Stop using the cream if skin begins to peel and is moist-looking.

Things to avoid:

- Extreme hot or cold temperatures on the skin in the treatment area (i.e. ice packs and heating pads)
- Hot tubs, saunas and chlorinated pools
- Swimming in lakes
- All perfumes, lotions, creams, sprays, colognes etc. in the treatment area - **except** Lubriderm® (unscented, lanolin free) or Glaxal Base® cream

Please note that during treatment and even after treatment is complete your skin in the treatment area will always be more sensitive to sunlight. You will need to protect your skin with sunscreen (after treatment is complete and the skin has healed) or keep it covered from the sun.

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
- 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.



Light exercise such as walking may help with fatigue.

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:

Monday – Friday from 8:00 am – 3:30 pm

Cancer Centre Symptom Support
705-728-9090 x79565



Evenings, weekends and holidays:

Monday – Friday from 5:00 pm – 8:00 am;
weekends and holidays 24 hours.

Bayshore CAREpath 1-877-681-3057

To cancel or change your appointment, please call
705-728-9090 x43333, Monday – Friday from 8:00 am –
4:00 pm.

Photo credits:

Page 5: haircut icon designed by Flaticon.com

Page 5: person sleeping designed by Freepik.com

Simcoe Muskoka
Regional Cancer Program



Royal Victoria
Regional Health Centre

A Cancer Care Ontario Partner

Simcoe Muskoka Regional Cancer Program

201 Georgian Drive

Barrie, ON L4M 6M2

Phone: 705-728-9090 x43333

www.rvh.on.ca

Last updated January 2020