

# **Managing Side Effects of Palliative Radiation Therapy**

## ***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, and may vary from person to person. These side effects may also 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.

## ***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.

## ***General Side Effects (continued...)***

### **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 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.

## ***Side Effects of Radiation to the Brain***

### **Headaches**

If you are having headaches, call the Symptom Support Telephone Service right away. See back of pamphlet for details.



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.

**Nausea and Vomiting** – see Abdomen section, page 5

### **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.

While 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, 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.



## 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 telephone service right away (see back of pamphlet for details).**

## *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.

## Nausea & Vomiting (continued from previous page)

If you are having nausea and/or vomiting, 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. Drink small frequent sips of clear fluids. Sucking on ice chips and popsicles can also help.



## ***Side Effects of Radiation to the Chest***

### **Dry Cough**

If you cough up blood please call the Symptom Support Telephone Service (see back of pamphlet for details)



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

## **If you're having a dry cough, 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 worsen the irritation.

## **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.

## **If you are having a sore throat or difficulty swallowing, things you can do:**

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

## ***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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