

# Managing Side Effects of Pelvic Radiation for Gynaecological Cancers

## In this booklet you will learn about:

- Common side effects when you receive radiation therapy to your pelvis
- 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*

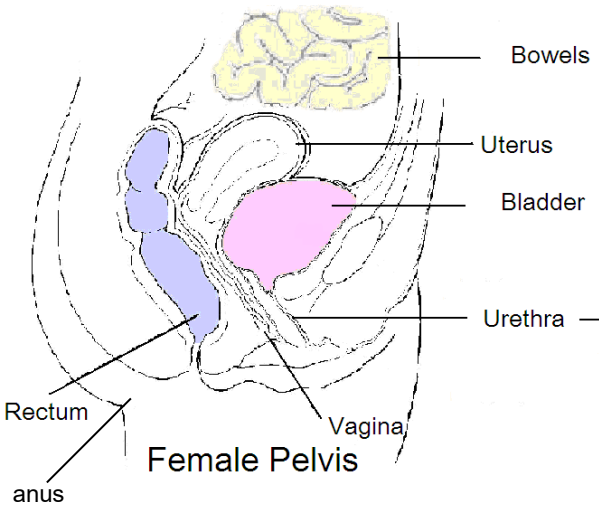


## ***Radiation Side Effects***

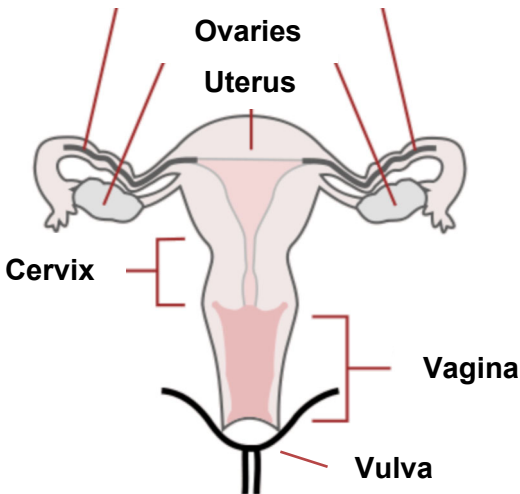
Side effects caused by radiation therapy to the pelvis may vary from person to person. These side effects may be affected by other treatments, such as surgery, chemotherapy, and medications. In this booklet, we have listed some of the more common side effects and helpful tips to manage them. The majority 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 diagrams to help explain the parts of your body that may experience side effects from your radiation treatment.



## Fallopian Tubes



## ***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
- Diarrhea
- Urgency (sudden need to empty your bowels)
- Rectal bleeding
- Bowel obstruction

**If you feel severe constant pain in the bowel area, have a swollen abdomen, and can't pass bowel movements or gas, your bowel may be obstructed (blocked).**



**Go to your nearest emergency department immediately AND also call the Symptom Support Telephone Service (see back of pamphlet for details).**

### **Frequent Bowel Movements**

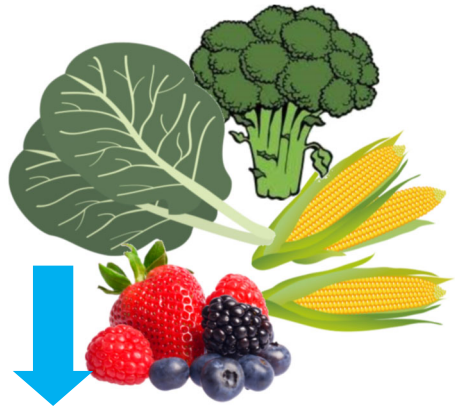
As the lining of your bowel becomes irritated by the radiation treatments, you may notice a change in the number of times you need to empty your bowels daily. You may have frequent, small bowel movements or feel you are not emptying your bowels completely.

## Diarrhea

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

### **If you are having diarrhea, things you can do:**

- 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
- Cut back on high fibre foods such as whole grains, nuts and seeds
- 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
- Use over the counter medications for diarrhea, such as Imodium<sup>®</sup> (loperamide). Follow the directions on the box for Imodium<sup>®</sup>. If diarrhea continues after you have used Imodium<sup>®</sup>, tell your Care Team.



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.



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

**Tell your Care Team if you are having any these bladder-related symptoms.**

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
- A slower urine stream
- Blood in your urine

### **Things you can do while on treatment:**

- Drink 2 cups of pure cranberry juice each day

### **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

## ***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, which may cause 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 has started to become 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 Vulva and Vagina***

- Pelvic radiation may cause dryness and discomfort in your vagina. This may continue after treatment. Using water-based vaginal lubricants (e.g. K-Y<sup>®</sup> JELLY) and moisturizers (e.g. Replens<sup>®</sup>) may help.
- Your skin around the vagina and vulva may also become dry, itchy, weepy, or painful. Please speak to a member of your Care Team if these side effects occur.
- During your treatment, wear loose-fitting clothing and undergarments for comfort and to prevent the skin from rubbing against your clothing.
- You may lose some or all of your pubic hair, often 2-3 weeks after your first radiation treatment. Your pubic hair may or may not grow back depending on your radiation dose. If your pubic hair does come back, it will start growing back 2-3 months after treatment ends.

## ***Sexual Function***

Radiation treatments may affect sexual function and feelings.

- You may continue having sexual intercourse during your treatment if it does not cause discomfort
- You should not get pregnant while you are having radiation treatment.
- You and/or your partner should use birth control while you are on treatment and for a few months after treatment ends. If you think you might be pregnant, tell your Care Team immediately.



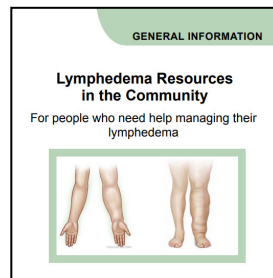
- Radiation therapy may cause your menstrual periods to stop. You may have some symptoms of menopause, like hot flashes, mood swings, and vaginal dryness.
- Your desires and feelings about sex and intimacy may change.

If you have questions or concerns, please speak with your Radiation Oncologist or Primary Nurse. Our Sexual Health, Intimacy and Cancer (SHIC) Clinic can also help with your sexual health and emotional concerns. Call 705-728-9090 x43520 for an appointment.



## ***Lymphedema***

Lymphedema is swelling of the soft tissues. For patients receiving radiation to their pelvis, the swelling can occur in the legs and pelvic/genital areas. Lymphedema may be caused by the cancer itself, or during cancer treatment (surgery and/or radiation) when lymph nodes may be removed/damaged.



See our brochures “Lymphedema” and “Lymphedema Resources in the Community” for more information, or talk to your Care Team.

## 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
- 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:  
Cancer Centre Symptom Support  
705-728-9090 x79565**



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

To cancel or change your appointment, please call 705-728-9090 x43333.

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

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