

# RADIOTHERAPY TO THE CHEST

## A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS/FAMILIES



This brochure provides information about Radiotherapy to the Chest. It is designed to respond to the questions most frequently asked by patients.



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Your doctor has prescribed external radiation to the chest. The radiation treatments are given while you are lying on your back. It is important that you be in the same position each time your radiation treatments are given. The machine moves around you to give you the treatment.

### General side effects

Below are some of the side effects that may happen during the course of treatment as time progresses. Some side effects start gradually, often towards the end of 2 weeks of treatment. Some side effects continue for weeks or months after treatment. Most will be gone about 1 month after treatment is finished. How you feel also depends on other factors, for example, whether you have had previous chemotherapy treatments.

#### 1. Dry cough

Many patients develop a dry cough during radiation treatment. The amount of mucus may increase as your treatment goes on. You may also find that you are short of breath. Inform the nurse or doctor if you have any trouble in breathing or are coughing a lot.

#### Actions that will help

Do	Don't
Drink plenty of fluids.	Go outside on hot and humid days. Being outdoors in very hot weather may irritate your lungs.
Wear light loose-fitting clothing.	Avoid anything tight such as ties or shirt collars around your neck.
Use extra pillows to raise your head and upper body while resting or sleeping; this may help you breathe easier.	Drink very hot or very cold liquids
Inform the nurse or doctor if you cough up blood or develop a fever.	Smoke or drink alcohol

## 2. Sore throat or trouble swallowing

The treatment area may include the esophagus (food pipe). About 2-3 weeks into treatment, you may have a sore throat and difficulty in swallowing. You may also have taste changes and dryness in your mouth. Sometimes the saliva may get thick.

If required the doctor may prescribe pain medication to help swallowing.

### Actions that will help

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Eat soft foods such as milk shakes, yogurt, mashed potatoes, puddings, ice cream, soft cereals and eggs.	Eat food such as crackers, chips, raw vegetables, raw fruits and crusty breads.
Eat small amounts and frequently.	Eat spicy foods.
	Drink very hot or very cold liquids
	Smoke or drink alcohol.

## 3. Nausea and vomiting

Radiation treatment to the chest may cause temporary nausea and/or vomiting. The amount of nausea and vomiting is different for each patient. It may occur 1 to 6 hours after your treatment. The doctor may prescribe an anti-nausea medication for you before your treatment begins. These drugs may cause drowsiness. Ask your oncologist, nurse or pharmacist if you should drive or operate heavy equipment when taking such medication.

Actions that will help

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Eat small meals frequently throughout the day.	Eat a heavy meal before your treatment.
Take your anti-nausea medication on a regular basis while you have nausea.	Wait for the nausea to get worse before taking your anti-nausea medication.
Eat slowly and chew your food well.	Eat spicy, fatty foods, and foods with a strong smell.
Try a clear liquid diet, such as chicken broth, green tea, apple and orange juice for severe upset stomach.	Have liquids with meals.
Try eating foods that are cold or at room temperature. Smells from hot food often make nausea worse.	
Drink plenty of fluids between meals such as water, apple, orange or pineapple juice.	
Having Jello and ice lollies can also help reduce nausea and maintain fluid intake.	
Have snacks such as dry crackers or toast.	
Eat foods that you enjoy, and make the food interesting and appealing.	

**4. Chest hair loss and skin**

You may lose some or all of your chest hair. With low doses of radiation, hair may grow back. With higher doses, hair loss may be permanent. If you lose your chest hair, it will happen 2-3 weeks after the first treatment. If it grows back, it happens after 2-3 months. Your skin may be dry or itchy.

Actions that will help

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Be careful washing the affected area. Use lukewarm water and mild soap like baby soap.	Scrub the skin hard as it may result in damaging the skin.
Pat dry with a soft towel.	Wear shirts with collars, as it may irritate the skin.
Apply aloe vera gel throughout the treatment, unless the skin has broken down.	Put anything very hot or cold on treatment area (for example heating pad or ice pack).
If using an aloe vera plant, the leaf should be split and the gel inside applied on the skin.	Use cosmetics, perfumes, cologne or deodorant in the area of treatment.
If using aloe vera gel that is readymade, it must be 99% pure.	Use chlorinated pools.
Wear loose clothes. Try to wear pure cotton clothes.	
Protect your skin from the sun or cold wind.	
Report any redness, rash, itching or skin breakdown to your nurse or doctor.	

**5. Tiredness**

You may feel tired throughout your treatment, but most people recover their energy 1-2 months after radiation is completed. During radiation therapy, the body uses a lot of energy for healing. You may also be tired because of stress related to your illness, daily trips for treatment, lack of sleep, poor appetite, and the effects of radiation on normal cells.

Actions that will help

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Continue with your regular activities for as long as possible.	Overwork yourself. If you start to feel tired, limit your activities and use your free time in a restful way, and only do the work that is most important.
Light exercises. Sometimes, light exercise such as walking may reduce tiredness.	
If you need to take time off from work, speak with your employer to adjust your schedule.	
To help conserve your energy, ask for help from neighbours and relatives for shopping, housework, childcare, and daily work.	

**If you have any questions, please contact your nurse at:**

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