

# RADIOTHERAPY TO THE HEAD AND NECK

A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS/FAMILIES



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



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Your doctor has prescribed radiotherapy to the head and neck area. Radiation treatment is usually given while you are lying on your back with your arms by your sides. It is important that you are in the same position each time your radiation treatments are given. You may have a plastic mask made for treatment, which helps keep you still. 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 after treatment. Most will be gone about 1 month after treatment is finished. How you feel also depends on other factors, such as the extent of surgery done, wound healing, having chemotherapy, etc.

#### 1. Skin

For the first week you will probably not notice any changes, and then your skin may become pink or red like a burn. Sometimes the skin may even peel or blister towards the end of your treatment. These changes may continue to worsen for a week or so after radiation has been completed, but then will start to settle down.

#### Actions that will help

Do	Don't
Be careful washing the affected area. Use lukewarm water and mild soap such as baby soap.	Scrub the affected area hard, which would result in damaging the skin.
Pat dry with a soft towel.	Use cosmetics, perfumes, or cologne in the area of treatment.
Apply aloe vera gel throughout the treatment area, unless the skin has broken down. If using an aloe vera plant, the leaf should be split and the gel inside applied on the skin. If using aloe vera gel that is readymade, it must be 99% pure.	Put anything very hot or cold on the treatment area (for example heating pad or ice pack).

Do	Don't
Wear loose clothes. Try to wear pure cotton clothes.	Use chlorinated pools.
Protect your skin from the sun or cold wind. Use a head cover or wear a scarf.	Smoke.
Wash your hands before and after touching the affected area.	Use a hair dryer.
Use only an electrical shaver, if you need to shave.	
Report any redness, rash, itching or skin breakdown to your nurse or doctor.	

## 2. Dry mouth and sore mouth or throat

If your mouth is in the treatment area you may also have taste changes and dryness in your mouth. This usually occurs during the first and second week of treatment. This is because the radiation affects the glands that make saliva. Sometimes your saliva may get thicker and sticky.

If your mouth or throat is in the treatment area, they will become red and sore making it difficult to swallow. This usually begins to happen during the second or third week of treatment. This reaction will vary from person to person and will gradually improve after treatment is completed. Your doctor may give you pain medication.

The dryness and swelling in your throat may cause you to temporarily lose your voice or for your voice to become hoarse. This should return to normal as your reactions settle down after the completion of treatment. Sometimes dryness of the mouth, as a result of damage to the salivary glands, may be permanent. Your doctor will advise you if this could be the case for you.

Actions that will help

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Drink 6-8 glasses of fluid a day.	Have extremely hot and cold drinks.
Carry a small water bottle with you.	Smoke or drink alcohol.
Chew food well, and sip water while eating.	
Brush your teeth and rinse your mouth regularly. Use a soft children's toothbrush.	
Gargle with one teaspoon of baking soda and a pinch of salt in a glass of warm water, regularly 4 times a day.	
Suck a sugarless hard candy or gum to increase saliva.	
Use the mouthwash your doctor prescribes as advised.	

### 3. Hair loss

You may lose facial hair (beard and moustache) if they are included in the radiotherapy field. With low doses of radiation, hair may grow back. With higher doses, hair loss may be permanent. If you lose your facial hair, it will happen 2- 3 weeks after the first treatment. If it grows back, it happens after 2-3 months.

Actions that will help

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Be careful washing the affected area. Use lukewarm water and mild/ baby soap and shampoo.	Scrub the affected area hard, which would result in damaging the skin.
Pat dry with a soft towel.	
Use an electric razor if you need to shave.	
Report any redness, rash, itching or skin breakdown to your nurse or doctor.	

#### 4. 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

Do	Don't
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.	
If required, you can speak with your nurse or doctor on how to deal with the tiredness.	
To help conserve your energy, ask for help from neighbours and relatives for shopping, housework, childcare, and daily work.	

#### 5. Mouth Care

Good mouth care is very important. It can make you feel better during treatment and it keeps your mouth healthy after treatment.

Actions that will help

Do	Don't
Rinse your mouth and gently clean your teeth after each meal.	
Ensure your dentures fit properly and keep them clean.	
Use a mouth rinse of one teaspoon of baking soda and a pinch of salt per glass of water to clean your mouth. Do this at least four to five times a day.	
Use the pain medication your doctor has prescribed before meals to allow you to eat more comfortably.	
Check with your doctor before having any dental work done (during treatment and afterwards). <b>It is strongly recommended that all dental work be completed before the start of your treatment.</b>	
Check the fit of your dentures after the completion of treatment. Radiation changes the tissue in the mouth and because of this dentures often need to be refitted.	

**6. Dietary recommendations during treatment**

Food may not taste the same but it is important to continue to eat to maintain nutrition.

### Actions that will help

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Eat foods at room temperature.	Eat spicy foods that contain pepper and chilly powder.
Eat small meals frequently throughout the day.	Eat extremely hot and cold foods.
	Eat acidic food such as pickles or citrus fruits such as oranges, lemon, tomatoes.
	Eat harsh foods such as crusty breads, raw fruits or vegetables.
	Drink extremely hot and cold drinks, such as hot tea or carbonated cold drinks.
	Smoke or drink alcohol.

### Suggested foods

- *Lassi*
- Soft *Daals* without spice
- *Khichri*
- Soft rolls, bread
- Mashed potatoes
- Soft cheese
- Yogurt, pudding, custard, ice cream
- Milk Shakes, liquid nutritional supplement like Ensure
- Soups, mild pastas
- Reduced acid juices (apple or juices labeled as: low acid)
- Fruit-flavoured drinks

- Fresh fruits such as, bananas, peaches, pears, melons, apples, apricots
- Soft cereals soaked in milk
- Pancakes

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

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