



## Radiation Therapy to the Pelvis

This handout offers information on the side-effects you may have from radiation therapy treatments. For more information on radiation treatment, see the Canadian Cancer Society's booklet on Radiation Treatment: A Guide for People with Cancer. Go to [cancer.ca](http://cancer.ca) and search for the name of the booklet.

After each radiation therapy treatment, it is safe for you to be around other people (including children) and pets. You are not radioactive.

We will give you and your family member/partner-in-care support during your treatments. We will also answer any questions you have.

### Side effects from radiation treatment to your pelvis

Radiation treatment side effects are not the same for everyone. The side effects you have depends on: the part of your body being treated, the type of radiation, the number of treatments you have and your general health. Side effects may be caused by other treatments you are having. It is important that you keep a healthy weight during your treatments. If you are having problems with this, ask to be referred to a dietitian.

The following information is about the side effects you may have.

### Bowel symptoms

Radiation therapy to your pelvis area may cause you to have more bowel movements than normal for you. Your stool may be loose or watery with or without stomach cramping.

Here is what you can do to help:

- Laxatives and stool softeners may make your diarrhea worse. If you are taking these medications, ask your radiation oncologist or nurse about stopping them.
- Medications such as Metoclopramide or Domperidone may make your diarrhea worse. If you are taking these medications, ask your radiation oncologist or nurse about stopping them.
- Diarrhea can cause you to become dehydrated. It is important to drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of liquid each day. This could include water, juice, soups or sports drinks. Drink an extra cup of liquid for every watery bowel movement you have. Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you are not able to drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of liquid each day when you have diarrhea.
- Eat small meals of cooked and peeled vegetables/fruits, white bread, lean red meat, fish or chicken throughout the day.
- Reduce the amount of fibre, caffeine, alcohol and greasy, spicy or sugary foods in your diet.
- Do not eat or drink anything with an artificial sweetener in it. Artificial sweeteners may make your gas and diarrhea worse.
- Take an over the counter anti-diarrhea medication recommended by your healthcare team.

For more information, read the “How to Manage Your Diarrhea” booklet found at [www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3151](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3151)

## **Bladder symptoms**

Radiation therapy to your pelvis area may cause you to:

- Feel pain when you urinate (pee).
- Have difficulty urinating.
- Feel like you are not always emptying your bladder.
- Feel you need to urinate right away.
- Urinate more often, especially at night.

What you can do to help:

- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of liquid every day.
- Drink less liquids that have alcohol or caffeine in them.
- Drink less liquids after your evening meal.

## **Skin symptoms**

Radiation therapy to your pelvis area may cause you to have dry, itchy or reddening of the skin in the treatment area. These symptoms are common in areas where there is friction or skin folds. You may have loss of hair in the treatment area.

### Caring for your skin in the treatment area

You can:

- Wash your skin gently. Use an unscented soap and lukewarm water. Pat dry.
- Use water-based, lanolin free, and unscented lotions or creams to moisturize your skin.
- Wear soft, loose fitting clothing over your skin in the treatment area.
- Use an electric razor and not a disposable shaver to shave your skin in the treatment area.
- Use Anusol or a similar product for irritation of your anal area (if recommended by your radiation oncologist).

Do not:

- Do not go swimming if you have any sores or open areas in the treatment area.
- Do not use aftershave or perfume on any area of your skin that is being treated.
- Do not use baby powder or cornstarch on any skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use aloe vera on any skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use a heating pad or ice pack on any skin in the treatment area. Do not sit in a hot tub.
- Do not use adhesive tape or band-aids in the treatment area.
- Do not allow your skin surfaces to rub together or clothing rub against the skin in the treatment area.

It is important to let your healthcare team know if you have any signs or symptoms of an infection such as fever, drainage, or odour from a sore or wound on your skin.

## **Nausea and vomiting**

Radiation therapy to your pelvis area may cause nausea (feeling sick to your stomach) or vomiting.

What you can do to help:

- Take dimenhydrinate (example: Gravol) before your treatment to help prevent nausea and vomiting.
- Sip small amounts of liquid often during the day.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of liquid every day. Drink even when you don't feel thirsty. It is important to stay hydrated.
- Drink cool liquids. They may be easier to drink than hot or cold liquids.
- Drink liquids and eat foods at least 30 minutes apart.
- Eat small amounts of food every 2 to 3 hours. Hunger can make feelings of nausea worse.
- Some patients say that ginger or peppermint make them feel better.
- Ask for a referral to see a dietitian.
- Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you: are not able to keep any water, food or medications in your stomach; have nausea that lasts more than 24 hours or are weak, dizzy or confused.

For more information, read the “How to Manage Your Nausea and Vomiting” booklet found at [www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3131](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3131)

## **No energy/feeling tired**

Radiation Therapy to the pelvis area may cause you to feel tired. You may find your energy level is low.

What you can do to help:

- Keep your normal sleeping schedule. Wake up at the same time each day.
- A short nap (less than an hour) between 12pm and 3pm may give you more energy.
- Reduce your alcohol and caffeine in the afternoon and evening.
- Plan your day with time to rest before and after activities.
- Eat healthy foods. Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of liquid every day. This will help you stay hydrated.
- Keep active with about 30 minutes of exercise (example: walking) each day. If 30 minutes is too hard, split it up into shorter 5 to 10 minute sessions.

For more information, read the “How to Manage Your Fatigue” booklet found at [www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3991](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3991)

## **Vaginal symptoms**

Radiation therapy to your pelvis area may cause your vagina to feel dry and tight. It can also cause scarring. This scarring can make your vagina narrower and less flexible. This may cause you to have pain with a pelvic exam or with sex. You may notice this side effect more if you have brachytherapy (internal) treatment as well.

What you can do to help:

- Wear cotton underwear and pantyhose with ventilated lining.
- Your healthcare team can recommend creams or suppositories that may help with your vaginal dryness.
- Using a water based lubricant can make sex more comfortable.
- A vaginal dilator is a device that you put inside your vagina to keep it open for a period of time. Your healthcare team will give you information about this if it would help you.

### **Penile symptoms**

Radiation therapy to your pelvis area may cause erectile dysfunction. Erectile dysfunction is when you have difficulty having or keeping a firm erection. This happens when there is less blood flow to your penis, which leads to a less firm erection. Some cancer treatments can also cause your penis to change in size and shape.

What you can do to help:

- Keep trying to get an erection. Any type of blood flow to the penis is helpful. Keep up with any kind of touching, either by yourself or with your partner.
- Talk to your healthcare team about therapies to help you get an erection. Things like erection pills or vacuum erection devices may help.
- Try having fun with sexual activity that does not focus on intercourse. You may be able climax/orgasm even if your penis is not firm.

### **Fertility**

Radiation treatment to the pelvis may affect your fertility. Your doctor will talk to you about this and give you the information you need. Birth control is recommended during treatment.

Pre-menopausal women may experience menopause following treatment. This means that you will not have periods anymore.

### **Relationships, body image and intimacy symptoms**

Radiation therapy can affect your relationships, body image and intimacy. It may change the way you feel about sex. It is also common to have fears and worries that may affect your relationships with others. This can cause changes in your stress level and emotions.

What you can do to help:

- Talk to any member of your healthcare team about your fears and worries.
- Talk to your family and friends about your fears and worries.
- Ask any member of your healthcare team about community programs that can help support you such as Hearth Place, Canadian Cancer Society, and the Look Good Feel Better Program.
- Keep a daily journal throughout your treatment.

For more information read the “Intimacy and Sex For People With Cancer and Their Partners” booklet found at [www.cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf)

## **Preparing for your treatment**

Go to the main reception on B1 level for your first appointment. The clerk will show you how to check in at the computer for your appointments. Your first day on the treatment unit may take extra time. The radiation therapists will check the treatment plan that was made for you. X-ray images will also be taken. These images will be used to check that your treatment matches your treatment plan. This process will be repeated throughout your treatment.

## **After your treatments are finished**

Any side effects you have from your radiation treatment will continue for 4 to 6 weeks after you are finished. Some of the side effects may get worse before they get better. At your last treatment appointment, the radiation therapists will review any care you need to continue during this time. Make sure you have a follow up appointment booked with your radiation oncologist.

## **If you have a problem or concern about a symptom or side effect from your cancer treatment:**

1. Call your primary nurse at the cancer centre from Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 4 pm, (except on holidays). Use the phone number your primary nurse gave you.
2. Contact CareChart Digital Health from Monday to Friday, 5 pm to 8:30 am and anytime on weekends and holidays for symptom management support.

Talk to a nurse using one of these options:

- Call the after-hours telephone line at 1-877-681-3057.
- Request a video call by going to [www.carechart.ca](http://www.carechart.ca).
- Use the CareChart Digital Health App. This App is available to download for iOS or Android devices.

Call 911 or go to the emergency department at the hospital closest to you for a medical emergency. Please talk to any member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any of the information in this handout.

Last reviewed: June 2024