

Why is radiation therapy used to treat cancer?

Cancer may be treated with a combination of treatments such as surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. Radiation Therapy uses radiation from high-energy X-ray machines to kill cancer cells. Radiation is used to shrink tumours or lower the chance of the cancer returning in the chest area (and lymph node areas).

What will happen on the day I come for my treatment planning?

Your first visit to the radiation therapy department is called your “treatment planning appointment”. This will take about 45 minutes.

You will be x-rayed, measurements will be taken and markings will be placed on your skin. Your x-rays for treatment planning may be done by an x-ray machine or a CAT scanner. The x-rays do not hurt and you do not have to hold your breath. It is important that you lie still.

Your Radiation Therapists will make every effort to make you comfortable during the x-rays. They will explain every step of what they are doing. The measurements from your x-rays will be used to plan your treatments.

Before you get up off of the x-ray bed, your Radiation Therapists will give you small tattoo marks. They are about the size of the tip of a pen and are permanent. You may have 4 to 6 tattoos on your chest area. They will be used each treatment day to position you. After your treatment planning appointment, you may have some extra ink on your skin. It can be washed off when you get home.

At your treatment planning appointment, your Radiation Treatment Team members will answer any questions you may have. These may include questions about side effects, when your treatments will start, skin care, lodging, or other questions. Many people find it helpful to bring someone along to this appointment.

How long will it be until I start my radiation treatments?

After your treatment planning appointment, you will usually wait a few weeks before your treatments start. You will be notified of the start date for your radiation treatment as soon as your planning is completed and a time has been booked for the radiation treatment machine. Every reasonable effort will be made to start your treatments as soon as possible, and within the recommended waiting time.

How long will my treatments take?

Once your treatments begin you should expect to have 1 to 7 weeks of radiation treatments. The treatments are given 5 days a week, Monday to Friday (except for holidays). You may not necessarily start your treatments on a Monday.

Your appointment each day will take about 15 minutes. This allows 5 to 10 minutes to get you into position and only a few minutes of actual radiation treatment. Your first treatment will be longer than 15 minutes, so expect to be at the clinic a little longer your first day.

Once a week you will see your Radiation Oncologist and/or Oncology Nurse for a checkup after your treatment. Be prepared to be here longer that day. You may also ask to be seen any other day if you have an urgent problem or question.

What side effects will I have during the radiation treatments (and the first few weeks after)?

In general, radiation to the chest area causes mild to moderate side effects. In the first couple weeks of treatment, there may be few side effects except for a little tiredness. For most people side effects appear toward the end of the radiation and may peak 1 or 2 weeks after the radiation is finished. The side effects should go away over the next several weeks.

If you have questions during your treatments, please ask a member of your Radiation Treatment Team - your Radiation Oncologist, Radiation Therapist or Oncology Nurse.

Common side effects include:

- **Fatigue (Tiredness)**

Fatigue caused by radiation therapy is usually mild. You may be more tired after a usual activity or may need to rest more than usual. You will be given an **information sheet** with suggestions to help you cope with the fatigue.

- **Skin reaction**

Your skin in the treatment area may become dry and itchy, pink or even red. Some dark skinned patients may have increased darkening of the skin.

You are allowed to wash and bathe. Your tattoo marks will not wash off. Try not to scratch or rub the affected area. You will also be given a separate **information sheet** with suggestions for skin care during the radiation.

- **Difficulty swallowing**

Radiation to the chest area may cause some irritation of your esophagus (the tube through which food passes when we swallow). You may feel you have heartburn or a “lump” in your esophagus. You may have pain or difficulty swallowing certain foods.

What can I do if I am having trouble swallowing?

Foods that you should eat

- Soups (warm not hot)
- Yogurt
- Soft eggs (poached, scrambled)
- Puddings, custards
- Pasta
- Milkshakes
- Juices: apple, pear, peach
- Canned fruits
- Well cooked or mashed vegetables
- Chopped meats with gravy

Foods that you should avoid

- Toast, dry cereal
- Crackers, cookies, cake
- Raw vegetables
- Popcorn, nuts, potato chips
- Regular meats (especially dry, coarse, and stringy meats)
- Tart or acidic foods
- Citrus juices: orange, grapefruit, tangerine
- Spicy foods (pizza, chili)

- Try eating smaller amounts of food more often.
- Do not drink alcohol, as it will irritate your throat.
- Choose bland foods. Highly seasoned foods and acidic foods may irritate your throat.
- Choose foods that are warm (not hot) and cool (not cold). Foods at extreme temperatures can cause irritation.
- Drinking liquids with meals may be helpful, especially if you are having a hard time with swallowing or are having a burning sensation with eating food. Try sipping on liquids between bites of solid foods.

Your Radiation Oncologist may prescribe a special liquid that can help you eat and swallow more easily. It helps by reducing the pain in your throat.

- **Cough**

You may find you cough more. This may be either a dry cough or a cough with more mucous/phlegm. The cough is caused by irritation of the lung or airways.

If you have a lot of phlegm, make sure you are drinking enough fluids to keep the mucous thin so you may cough it up more easily.

You may try sleeping with your head elevated. As well, you may find it helpful to use a humidifier, especially in the bedroom at night.

Your Radiation Oncologist may suggest a cough medicine.

How will the treatments affect My Sexuality?

Most people with cancer (and their partners) experience a number of physical, emotional and practical changes through their treatment and recovery. These changes can happen during treatment and recovery and may affect your sexual health.

There may be changes in how you look, or how you think you look, that can affect how you feel. This may affect how you respond sexually. Reactions of a partner can also add to how you see yourself as a sexual being.

You may notice periods of time during treatment and recovery when you have little interest in sex. This may be upsetting to you and your partner. You may have worries (like concerns about your cancer, treatments and how the illness is affecting your life) and these can affect both your own and your partner's interest and enjoyment of sex.

If you are single, you may have different worries and challenges such as how to talk about sexuality and cancer with a new partner.

If you or your partner would like more information about how your treatment might affect sexual activity, or you would like to discuss concerns, please ask your Nurse, Radiation Therapist, or Radiation Oncologist. We can give you more information to read. If you would like to talk to someone, there are number of health professionals available in our cancer program who can discuss concerns about sexuality with you (and your partner).

What is Supportive Care?

Cancer is a physical disease but it also can affect how you think and feel. Your emotional health and well-being are very important as you go through your treatments. It is normal for you and your family to have many feelings at this time. You may feel anxious, frightened, worried, angry or depressed.

There is support available in the cancer program. A number of health care professionals may be available for you and/or your family: they can include a social worker, nurse, therapist, spiritual care counselor, psychologist, and psychiatrist. They can help you cope with cancer and the emotions you are experiencing, as well as help with stress management, lifestyle changes, financial concerns or medication coverage.

At any time you can ask your Radiation Oncologist, Nurse or Radiation Therapist to refer you to this support team. You will then receive a call from a member of the team to set up a separate appointment.

There are also Support and Wellness Groups available where you can talk with or listen to others who have a similar experience, or learn more about cancer and how to live well with it. Information about these groups is available at the reception desk at your Cancer Centre or through the Canadian Cancer Society – Nova Scotia Branch.

Questions you may want to ask your Radiation Treatment Team:

1. Do I have to do anything to prepare for my radiation markings or treatment?
2. Can I bathe or wash?
3. What should I expect to happen during my treatments?
4. Will the treatments affect my breathing?
5. How will I cope with the side effects?
6. How will I know if the treatments are working?
7. What happens when the treatments end?
8. Do I need to come back for a checkup?
9. Will I have any long-term side effects from my treatments?
10. Who can I talk to if I have questions about supportive care; for example, medication costs, insurance, home care, transportation, emotional concerns, or any other questions?
11. Is there a research study for my cancer type that might be appropriate for me? (or that I could be involved in?)

Notes



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