

What to Expect During Treatment: Radiation Therapy to the Pelvis

Why is radiation therapy used to treat my cancer?

Radiation therapy is a type of treatment that is often used to treat cancer. Radiation therapy may be used in combination with other therapies such as chemotherapy or surgery. Your medical team has recommended radiation therapy as a part of your treatment. Your radiation plan is designed specifically for you by your radiation oncologist. This pamphlet will help to remind you what was discussed and should help you understand what to expect with your treatments.

What is radiation therapy to the pelvic region?

Radiation treatment to the pelvic region is radiation given to the area of the body between the belly button and top of the thigh. Radiation therapy is given to the pelvic region for many types of cancer. Your radiation oncologist should talk to you about your specific cancer, and why radiation to your pelvis will be part of your treatment.

What will happen on the day I come for my markings?

The day you come to the Cancer Centre for markings is called your “simulation appointment”. During this visit, you will be x-rayed, measured and marked for your radiation treatments. It will take about 45 minutes. Your x-rays for simulation may be done by an x-ray machine or a CAT scan machine, or both. Regardless of which machine is used, the x-rays do not hurt and you do not have to hold your breath. It is very important that you do not move. The radiation therapists who will be taking care of you on this visit will make every effort to make you comfortable. They will explain every step of the way what they are doing. Information from your x-rays will be used to design and calculate your treatments. You may have to drink a couple of glasses of special liquid before the simulation. Your radiation therapist will explain this to you if it is needed.

Once all your x-rays and measurements are complete, the radiation therapists will give you small tattoo marks that will be used each day to position you for your radiation treatments. These tattoo marks, about the size of a freckle, will be permanent. After your simulation appointment, you may have some marker and extra ink on your skin. It can be washed off when you get home.



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Your radiation oncologist and radiation therapist will answer any questions you may have about your treatments including the side effects, how to take care of your skin, and even lodging and accommodations... so come prepared to have your questions answered. Most people find it helpful to bring someone else along to hear all that the therapists and doctor have to say.

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

After your simulation appointment, you will usually wait for a few weeks while the Cancer Centre staff plans and prepares your treatment. 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 you have received the call to come to the centre for your treatments you should expect to have 1 to 7 weeks of radiation treatments. Your radiation oncologist will let you know exactly how many treatments you will be having. 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 15 minutes. This allows 5 to 10 minutes to get you in position and only a few minutes of actual radiation treatment time. Once a week you will see your radiation oncologist and nurse for a check-up after your treatment. Be prepared to be at the clinic for more than 15 minutes that day.

What side effects will I have from the radiation treatments?

Most patients will have side effects as a result of their radiation treatments. The first week of treatment should be easy, with very few side effects except for a little tiredness. For most people their side effects tend to appear toward the middle of the course of radiation and peak 1 or 2 weeks after the radiation is finished. They go away over the next 4 to 8 weeks. For people who are having chemotherapy at the same time as the radiation, the side effects may appear sooner and be more severe.

Will radiation treatments to the pelvis affect my sexuality?

As with most side effects from radiation, effect on sexuality is individual. The possibility and severity of changes to sexual desire and ability will vary from patient to patient. The following possible side effects should help you think of some concerns to discuss with your doctor:

- For Men:

General fatigue and stress from both the radiation treatments and body changes may lessen your desire to have a sexual relationship. There is some possibility that the treatments may cause impotence. If you have any concerns, please ask to talk with your radiation oncologist.

- For Women:

General fatigue and stress from both the radiation treatments and body changes may lessen your desire to have a sexual relationship. As well, many women have dryness of the vagina, discharge from the vagina and changes to their menstrual cycle (period).

The vagina may become more dry and irritated during treatment and, as a result, intercourse could cause bleeding and discomfort. If intercourse is painful, avoid intercourse until the soreness goes away. If you are having vaginal bleeding it is best not to have intercourse. You may have more or a different type of discharge from the vagina during your treatments. Do not douche. Tell your radiation therapist, nurse or radiation oncologist if the discharge is foul-smelling or bloody.

The radiation treatments may cause narrowing or loss of elasticity of your vagina. You should discuss with your radiation oncologist the need for using a dilator after your treatments are finished.

You are encouraged to discuss any problems concerning side effects, diet or any other aspect of your therapy with your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist.

What is Supportive Care?

Cancer is a physical disease but it also affects how you think and feel. You and your family/friends might feel a range of emotions (like fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, depression, loneliness or frustration) related to your cancer diagnosis and treatment. This is understandable. Sometimes it is not possible to get all of the help and support you need from people closest to you. If you are having trouble coping with your cancer diagnosis, there are health care professionals at the Cancer Centre who can help (such as psychologist, social worker, advanced practice nurse, spiritual care counselor, psychiatrist). As well, there are Support Groups you could attend, where you could talk with, or listen to, others who are going through a similar diagnosis and treatment. If you are interested in talking with someone about your feelings and experiences, tell the medical staff so they can connect you with the appropriate person or group. Your emotional health and well-being are very important.

Questions you may want to ask your Health Care Team

- Can I continue my normal activities?
- Do I have to do anything to prepare for my radiation markings or treatments?
- What should I expect to have happen during my treatments?
- How will I know the radiation treatments are working?
- Can I wash?
- How will I cope with the side effects?
- What happens when the treatments end?
- Will I have any long-term side effects from my treatments?
- Will the radiation treatments cause sterility?
- Will the radiation treatments cause early menopause?

Notes

During the last few weeks of treatment, most people have:

- **Fatigue**

You may notice that you feel unusually tired during the last weeks of your treatment. This is not unusual. We recommend that you pace your activities and plan for frequent rest periods to avoid becoming overtired. You may be more tired after a usual activity and may need a nap or rest after each treatment. You will be given an **information sheet** with suggestions to help cope with the fatigue.

- **Skin Reaction**

Skin changes such as redness, dryness, peeling and tanning are to be expected. The skin reaction may occur on the front, back and sides of your pelvis. Itching and dryness may occur, but do not scratch the affected area. You will be given an **information sheet** with suggestions to help you cope with your skin reaction.

- **Irritation of the perineum**

The **perineum** is the area between your legs, from the front of your groin to your rectum. The skin in your perineum may become reddened and irritated from the treatments. To help ease the discomfort, most people find that soaking in warm water helps a lot. You can do this by filling up the tub with a few inches of warm water and soaking your “bottom” for about 15 minutes. Or you can buy a sitz bath pan that fits under the toilet seat. Fill the pan with a few inches of warm water and soak in the water for relief. Take sitz baths as often as you feel the need. Pat the area dry with a soft towel or cloth. Do not use any lotions or creams you have at home, they will usually make your discomfort worse.

- **Irritation of the Bladder or Rectum**

During the last few weeks of treatment, most people feel some irritation or soreness of the bladder or rectum... almost like a sunburn on the inside. You may be passing urine more often, sometimes with a slower stream (**cystitis**). Your bowel movements may be more frequent (**diarrhea**) and painful. You will be given **information sheets** with suggestions to help you cope with changes to your bladder or rectum.