

Radiation Therapy to the Abdomen

You are getting radiation to your belly, or abdomen, as part of your cancer treatment. This factsheet is about side effects that could happen. It also tells you ways to manage the side effects.

Possible Side Effects

Nausea. You may feel sick to your stomach. This depends on the location and size of the treatment area and how much radiation you get. Nausea usually starts 2–6 hours after treatment. Tell your cancer care team if you feel sick. These tips may help with nausea:

- Eat small amounts of food several times a day instead of three large meals.
- Ask your cancer care team about eating something light before your radiation, such as crackers or toast.
- Avoid lying flat after eating.
- Ask your cancer care team about medicine to ease nausea before your treatment.

Eating well is important. Your cancer care team will check to make sure you are eating and drinking enough. They will check your weight every week.

Heartburn. Sometimes radiation treatments can cause heartburn. You may feel as if you have a lump when you swallow or that food sticks in your throat.

These tips may help with heartburn:

- Avoid acidic and spicy foods.
- Include softer foods in your diet.
- Drink liquid supplements such as Ensure® or Carnation Instant Breakfast®.
- Ask your cancer care team before using antacids or acid blocker medicines.

Diarrhea. You may have bowel movements that are more frequent or diarrhea, which is loose, watery stools. This depends on the location of the treated area. Tell your cancer care team if you have diarrhea. They can suggest diet and medicines to help.

These tips may help ease pain in the anal area that diarrhea can cause:

- Use alcohol-free baby wipes rather than toilet paper to wipe after bowel movements.
- Rinse the anal area with water using a squirt bottle after each bowel movement.
- Treat the anal area if it becomes sore or if you get hemorrhoids. Over-the-counter hemorrhoid products can help. Sitting in a warm bath with water above the hips may also help.

Skin changes. The effects of radiation on the skin depend on a number of things:

- Number of treatments
- Total radiation dose
- Sun exposure of the treated area before radiation therapy
- Overall health

Side effects to the skin occur only where the radiation enters and exits your body. If you are not sure where these areas are, ask your cancer care team. Take care of your skin from the first day of radiation, before side effects happen.

These skin changes may happen after a week or two of radiation treatment:

- Gets dry or itchy
- Turns darker, pink, or red
- Becomes sore and tender
- Peels or gets blisters

Radiation skin changes happen slowly over time. They may last for a while after radiation treatments end. Most effects are temporary. They go away 2–4 weeks after treatments end.

Here are some tips to help protect your skin:

- Wash gently with warm water. Do not scrub. Use your hands, not a washcloth. Pat dry with a soft towel.
- Use a mild soap without alcohol, perfumes or deodorants.
- Avoid rubbing on treated skin. Wear loose-fitting clothing. Cotton fabrics are the least irritating.

- Do not use adhesive bandages or tape in the treated area.
- Avoid temperature extremes. Do not use heating pads, hot water bottles, or ice packs on the treated area.
- Keep treated skin protected from the sun. Use sunscreen with at least SPF 30 when outdoors. Wear a wide-brimmed hat and clothing with long sleeves and legs. Do not use tanning beds.
- Use only an electric razor if you shave the treated area.

These tips may help with skin changes:

- Apply a moisturizing cream, lotion, gel, or oil to radiated skin. Do not use lotion right before your radiation treatments. Put it on at least 4 hours before.
- Choose products for sensitive skin. Avoid products with perfume or deodorant.
- If a product stings, stop using it.
- If your skin becomes tender or itchy, try using a 1% hydrocortisone cream from the drugstore. If needed, your cancer care team may prescribe a steroid cream.

Hair loss. After about two weeks, you will start to lose hair in the area that was treated. It will usually begin to grow back within 3–6 months after radiation treatment ends. Use only an electric razor if you shave within the treated area. Hair loss may be permanent, depending on the amount of radiation you get.

Fatigue. Feeling tired, or fatigue, is a common side effect of radiation treatments. Take good care of yourself while you are in treatment. Keep a balance between exercise and rest. If you feel very tired, you may need extra rest. Many patients find that mild exercise such as walking can improve energy levels. Talk to your cancer care team before you begin exercise.

These side effects may go on after your last treatment. If you have concerns, please talk with your cancer care team.