

Radiation Therapy to the Brain

You are getting radiation to your brain as part of your cancer treatment. This factsheet is about side effects that could happen. It also tells you ways to manage them.

Possible Side Effects

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

Skin changes. Skin changes from radiation depend on a number of things:

- Number of treatments
- Total radiation dose
- Overall health
- Previous sun exposure of the treated area

Side effects to the skin happen 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:

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

Radiation skin changes happen slowly over time. Most 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 perfumes or deodorants.

- Avoid rubbing on treated skin. Do not wear tight-fitting hats or scarves. Cotton fabrics are best.
- Do not use adhesive bandages or tape in treated area.
- Avoid temperature extremes. Do not use heating pads, hot water bottles, or ice packs on treated areas.
- Keep treated skin protected from the sun. Use sunscreen with at least SPF 30 when outdoors.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat.
- Do not use tanning beds.
- Use only an electric razor if you shave the area.

These suggestions can help manage skin changes:

- Apply a moisturizing cream, lotion, gel, or oil to radiated skin. Do not use lotion right before your radiation treatments. Apply at least 4 hours ahead.
- 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 necessary, your cancer care team may prescribe a steroid cream.

Ear changes. Sometimes radiation dries the ear canal. If your ears feel plugged, tell your health care team.

Upset stomach from steroid use. You may be taking steroids such as dexamethasone or prednisone. These medicines ease brain swelling. Follow your doctor's instructions for taking steroids exactly.

Steroid medicines may upset your stomach. Talk to your cancer care team about antacids or other medicines that can help.

Headache, nausea, or vomiting. Headache, nausea, or vomiting may happen during your treatment. Your disease or your medicine may cause these side effects.

Tell your cancer care team if you have headaches, nausea, or vomiting. They can help find ways to ease them.

Visual sensations. Some people report seeing blue or white lights when the treatment machine is turned on. This is a harmless effect of radiation on nerves in the eye.

Fatigue. Feeling tired, or fatigue, is a common side effect. Take good care of yourself while you are in treatment. If you feel very tired, you may need extra rest. Many patients find mild exercise such as walking can raise 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.