

Radiation Therapy to the Esophagus and Mid-Chest

You are getting radiation to your esophagus/mid-chest 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

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.
- Eat softer foods.
- Drink liquid supplements such as Ensure® or Carnation Instant Breakfast®.
- Ask your cancer care team before using antacids or acid blocker medicines.

Difficulty Swallowing/Sore Throat. You may have a sore throat and a difficult time swallowing. You may have a lump in your throat or a choking feeling. These problems can also cause you to cough when eating or drinking.

This may make it difficult to eat and get the nutrition you need. These tips may help with problems with your throat:

- Eat smaller amounts of food more often throughout the day. Cut foods into smaller pieces.
- Avoid foods that irritate your throat. Foods that are hot, spicy, acidic, or crunchy can make it worse. Avoid alcohol.
- Eat soft foods. Soften foods with dips, sauces, or other liquids. Cook foods until they are softer.
- You may need to increase your fluid intake when not eating as well. This can include various fluids including supplements such as Ensure, Boost, or Carnation Instant Breakfast.
- Avoid tobacco products.
- Sit upright while eating or drinking. Drink or eat pureed foods through a straw.

Let your cancer care team know if you are having these problems. You can meet with a dietician for some help, or your team can help you with therapy and medicines.

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.

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 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 mild soap without alcohol, perfumes, or deodorants.
- Avoid rubbing the 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.

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.