

Radiation Therapy to the Lung

You are getting radiation to your lung 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

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 go away after 2–4 weeks.

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. 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 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. 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 necessary, 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.

Sore mouth, sore throat, and difficult swallowing. You may have a sore throat that makes it hard to eat and swallow. This usually starts 2–3 weeks after your first treatment. It should start going away 2–3 weeks after you complete treatments. If you have trouble eating, it may be hard to keep your weight up. A dietitian on your cancer care team can help if needed.

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.

Lung problems. Normal lungs produce mucus. This mucus moves up into the throat so you can swallow or cough it out. Radiation treatment makes mucus thicker and harder to cough out. If this happens, gargle with club soda or a mixture of ½ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon baking soda in a quart of warm water.

You may also have a dry cough. A room humidifier may help. Your cancer care team may prescribe a medicine to help.

Nausea. A few people feel sick to the stomach during radiation treatment of the lungs. Your cancer care team can prescribe medicines to help with nausea.

Fatigue. Feeling tired, or fatigue, is a common side effect of radiation treatments. Take good care of yourself while you are in treatment. If you feel very tired, you may need extra rest.

Many patients find that mild exercise such as walking can improve energy levels. Keep a balance between exercise and rest. Do not exercise if it causes shortness of breath. 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.