Treatment of the General Side Effects of Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy can cause side effects. Some people may have very few side effects, while other people are bothered by more. The type and amount of side effects vary depending on the part of your body being treated, your treatment dose, and your general health.

Some general side effects that can occur with radiation therapy include fatigue, skin changes, hair loss, loss of appetite, and drop in blood cell counts. Skin changes and hair loss occur only in the area being treated.

Fatigue
Fatigue or feeling tired is the most common symptom for cancer patients. The exact cause is not always known. You may be feeling tired from the cancer itself or from the treatment.

With radiation therapy, many people begin to feel tired by the third week. After treatment is completed, fatigue slowly improves over the next few months. Some ways to deal with fatigue are:

- Plan activities for when you feel more rested.
- Set aside time for rests during the day.
- Try to get more sleep during the night.

Staying active is another way to help fatigue. Light exercise such as walking raises your energy level rather than making you more tired.

Start with a short walk, and slowly increase the amount of time that you walk. Don’t push yourself to do more than you can manage. Talk to your doctor about doing other activities.

Depending on your energy level, you may want to keep your normal work schedule or a reduced amount. It is a good idea to ask friends and family members to help with chores, shopping, housework, or driving. Conserve your energy for what is most important to you.

Sometimes you may find that you are not only tired but feeling “down.” Depression can occur with a major illness. If you or a family member suspects that you may have depression, talk to your doctor.

Fatigue may also affect your desire for sexual activity. If desired, try to plan for sexual activity.

Skin Changes
Everyone having radiation therapy needs to take extra care with their skin in the area being treated. After a few weeks of treatment, skin at the treatment site may look irritated, reddened, or tanned. Some people have a more severe skin reaction than others.

To care for your skin in the treatment area, avoid:

- Rubbing, scratching, or scrubbing
- Tight clothes that rub or constrict
Also avoid:
- Any powders, creams, perfumes, deodorants, body oils, lotions, or ointments
- Heating pads, hot water bottles, or ice packs
- Direct sunlight
- Hot or cold water

Use warm water and gentle, unscented or non-deodorant soaps (such as Dove® Sensitive Skin Unscented) when bathing. Use only prescribed ointments, lotions, and powders on the area.

If you need to shave in the treatment area, use an electric razor. Do not use a regular razor blade.

Check skin folds daily for redness in the area close to the radiation treatment. Bacteria and fungus can grow in these folds. Keep these areas clean and dry. Tell your therapist or nurse if your skin becomes red, moist, or wet. You will be told how to care for this in order to protect the skin and prevent infection.

**Hair Loss (Alopecia)**

Hair loss with radiation therapy may occur only on the body site that is being treated. Unlike chemotherapy, which can produce hair loss on the entire body, hair loss with radiation therapy only occurs where the treatment is given.

**Loss of Appetite**

Loss of appetite can occur with radiation therapy. Though your appetite may decrease, it is important to keep eating a healthful diet. Your weight will be checked often during your treatment. Some helpful tips to deal with loss of appetite include:

- Eat small, frequent meals throughout the day. You may be able to eat more without getting too full.
- Make mealtimes relaxing and pleasant.
- Keep snacks close by and eat whenever you feel like it. Take a snack with you when you go out.
- Drink your liquids between meals so you are not too full to eat at mealtimes.
- Drink beverages throughout the day if you do not feel like eating solids. Try juice, soup, or milkshakes.
- Try liquid or powdered meal replacements such as Carnation® Breakfast Essentials®, Boost®, or Ensure® when it is hard to eat solid food.
- Have a snack before bedtime.

**Low Blood Cell Counts from Decreased Production in Bone Marrow**

Sometimes radiation therapy can cause low blood cell counts:

- Neutropenia – low white blood cells, which fight infection.
- Anemia – low red blood cells, which carry oxygen to cells throughout the body.
- Thrombocytopenia – low platelets, which control bleeding.

Your blood will be checked as needed. If your blood cell levels drop, a treatment may need to be delayed. You may also be given special instructions.

Talk with your doctor, nurse or therapist about any questions or concerns.