



How to take care of yourself while receiving stereotactic radiation therapy to the brain

Introduction

Radiation therapy is the use of special x-rays to treat cancer. These x-rays kill cancer cells. But they can also temporarily affect healthy cells. This can cause side effects in the area of the body that is treated. Side effects differ for each person. They depend on the area of the body being treated, the type of radiation used, the dose of radiation and your general health.

This information is to help you to know what side effects you may have during and after your treatment. It will also tell you what to do to help reduce or manage side effects.

What is stereotactic radiation therapy?

This is a more precise type of radiation therapy. The doctor targets a specific area in your brain. This means that there are fewer side effects than with regular radiation therapy.

The technologist will fit you with a mask to place over your head. This is to keep your head still so we can target the right place in your brain.

The treatment is given in 1 to 5 sessions. Each session can take from 30 minutes to 2 hours.

If you feel anxious before or during the treatment, tell your technologist. Your doctor can prescribe a medication to help you relax.

Your doctor will follow up with you 4 to 12 weeks after your treatment is done.

What side effects can I expect?

(1) Neurologic effects (short-term)

- During the treatment, radiation therapy can cause temporary swelling in the brain. Your doctor will give you medications to reduce this.
- Common symptom:
 - Headache
- Other symptoms:
 - Nausea or vomiting
 - Feeling dizzy
 - Irritability (short temper)
 - Feeling unsteady when walking
- Depending on the area of the brain being treated and the symptoms you have, you may not be able to drive. Ask your doctor.

- If you already have these symptoms and they stay the same, you do not need to tell us.
- **If they get worse or are new for you, tell your technologist. You will need to see the doctor or nurse.**
- If the symptoms are severe or sudden, or if you have any seizures, go the Emergency Department. Call for an ambulance. Do not drive.

(2) Neurologic effects (long-term)

- Radionecrosis is an inflammation (swelling) of the dead cells in the part of the brain that was treated. It can happen months to years after treatment.
- If you have this, you may feel the same symptoms as when you had the cancer.
- Tell your doctor if you have any of these symptoms.
- Radionecrosis can usually be treated with medications to reduce the swelling.

(3) Fatigue

- Fatigue, or feeling tired, is a common side effect of radiation therapy.
- It is different than normal feelings of tiredness. It does not get better just by resting.
- What can I do if I have fatigue?
 - Try to remain as active as possible. This is the best way to fight fatigue. Walking is a good example of a way to stay active.
 - However, listen to your body. You may have to reduce you activities and rest sometimes.
 - If you need to nap, limit this to 30 minutes, early in the afternoon. Long naps can make it hard to sleep at night.

Do I need to follow a special diet?

- No, you do not need to follow a special diet.
- Try to maintain your weight. Your body needs nutrition for healing.
- It is important to stay well hydrated. Drink plenty of water throughout the day.

What can I do if I feel overwhelmed?

It is normal to feel many different emotions as you start a new cancer treatment. You can feel worried, angry, sad, numb or okay. These feelings can change over time.

What can I do to help myself?

- Talk with someone you trust.
- Talk with your doctor, technologist or nurse.

- Take part in Cedars CanSupport virtual support programs.
 - For information, call 514-934-1934 ext. 35297 or email cedarscansupport@muhc.mcgill.ca
- If these feelings make it hard to get through your day or to sleep at night, or if you feel very alone, tell your doctor, technologist or nurse. If needed, you can be referred to a social worker or the Psychosocial Oncology Program for help.

Where can I get more information?

If you want more information, the internet can be a way to get it. However, not all information found on the internet is accurate. You can visit these reliable websites:

cancer.ca — Canadian Cancer Society

fqc.qc.ca — Quebec Cancer Foundation

cansupport.ca/cancer-online-information — Cedars CanSupport, information by topic

cancer.net — American Society of Clinical Oncology

cancer.gov — National Cancer Institute

You can also contact the Cedars CanSupport Resource Centre by phone at 514-934-1934 ext. 31666 or by email at cedarscansupport@muhc.mcgill.ca

What should I do if I feel very sick or there is an emergency?

If you have an urgent issue that is causing you to worry in between hospital visits:

- Weekdays 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM:
 - Call 514-934-1934 ext. 43400 to talk with a nurse
- Evenings from 4:00 PM to 8:00 PM and weekends or holidays from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM:
 - Call 514-934-1934
 - Listen to the options and press the number for the operator
 - Ask for the radiation oncology resident on call

If your symptoms are very severe or you are unable to reach someone, go to the emergency department of the nearest hospital. Tell the doctor that you are receiving radiation therapy.

IMPORTANT PLEASE READ

Information provided is for educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice or instructions of a professional healthcare practitioner or to substitute for medical care. Contact a qualified healthcare practitioner if you have any questions concerning your care.

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