



How to take care of yourself while receiving radiation therapy to the head and neck

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 causes 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.

Most side effects start during the 2nd week of treatment. They may slowly progress during and up to 2 weeks after the end of the treatment before starting to get better.

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

Your doctor will examine you every week while you are receiving radiation therapy. Your technologist will give you your treatment every day. You can also ask to speak with a nurse. Ask any member of the team (doctor, technologist, nurse, nutritionist, speech-language therapist and dentist) if you have any questions.

What side effects can I expect?

(1) Skin reactions

When radiation is given, it passes through the skin to reach the area being treated. Skin reactions are a common side effect of radiation therapy. The skin might become red or darker in color, dry, itchy, or even peel or weep (look wet).

You can lose your hair on the lower part of the scalp in the area that is receiving treatment. It may take up to six months to regrow.

How should I care for my skin during radiation treatment to help prevent skin reactions?

1) Keep your skin clean

- a. Take quick showers or baths.
- b. Use lukewarm water.
- c. Wash your face and neck with mild **unscented** soap.
 - For example: Dove®, Cetaphil®, Aveeno® or CeraVe® unscented soap bar.
- d. For the skin in the area being treated:
 - i. Wash gently with the palm of your hand.

- ii. Rinse well.
- iii. Pat dry with a soft towel.

2) Keep the skin of the area being treated moisturized

- a. Apply **unscented** cream or lotion **at least twice a day.**
 - For example: Glaxal base, Cetaphil®, CeraVe®, Lipikar® or Cutibase®.
 - Avoid creams or lotions with any additives like vitamin E.
- b. Always ask your doctor, technologist or nurse before using another cream or lotion.

3) Protect your skin

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Shave with an electric razor. If you get any irritation, stop shaving. ✓ Protect your head and neck from the sun or cold by covering them with a hat and scarf. ✓ Wear loose-fitting clothes with soft, natural fibers such as cotton. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Do not rub, scrub, or scratch the skin being treated. ✗ Do not use tape on the skin being treated. ✗ Do not apply hot or cold to the skin being treated. This means not using heating pads, ice packs or hot tubs. You also should not take hot baths or showers. ✗ Do not swim. It can irritate your skin and erase the markings.

What should I do if I get a skin reaction?

- If you feel your skin is irritated or itchy:
 - Tell your technologist.
 - **Use your moisturizer more often.**
 - You can also wet a soft towel with cool water and put it on the skin for 5 minutes, four times a day.
- If the skin feels very irritated, or begins to peel or weep:
 - Tell your doctor, technologist or nurse.
 - You may receive a prescription for another type of skin cream.

(2) Effects on the mouth and throat

The radiation passes near the mouth and throat. You can have effects such as dry mouth, changes in taste and soreness in the mouth and throat. You could also have thicker or more saliva than usual.

How should I care for my mouth during radiation treatment to help prevent side effects?

1) Keep your mouth and teeth clean

- a. Brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush and toothpaste that has fluoride.
- b. Use fluoride trays (if prescribed by your dentist).
- c. If you have dentures, brush them every day with a denture brush and denture toothpaste. Rinse well.
- d. Rinse your mouth with a mouthwash solution of water mixed with salt and baking soda. Start on the first day of treatment. Rinse as many times as you can over the day. Do not swallow the mouthwash.

Recipe for mouthwash solution:

- 1 cup water
- ¼ teaspoon salt (put less salt or don't use any at all if your mouth burns)
- ½ teaspoon baking soda

2) Keep your mouth moisturized

- a. Carry a bottle of water with you. Taking sips often may help.
- b. Use a humidifier in the room where you sleep. Put it on the highest setting.
- c. If your mouth is dry:
 - You can use a moisturizer for your mouth. It can be a gel or a spray.
 - For example: Biotene spray® or Oral balance gel®.
 - You can use products to increase saliva, like XyliMelts® mints.

3) Protect your mouth

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ If your lips feel dry, use lip balm.✓ If your gums are irritated, clean them only with a sponge or use the mouthwash recommended above.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✗ Do not use store-bought mouthwashes.✗ Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol. These can increase irritation of the mouth or throat.✗ Avoid wearing dentures during the day if your gums are sore.

What should I do if I get a mouth reaction?

- Tell your doctor, technologist or nurse if you have any of the issues below:
 - Pain in your mouth
 - Pain when swallowing
 - Coughing when you are drinking
 - Nausea or vomiting

- Your doctor may prescribe medications for the pain or nausea.

(3) Loss of appetite

Mouth reactions can affect the way you eat and drink.

- It is important to not lose weight. Your body needs nutrition for healing.
- It is also important for you to stay hydrated.
- **How can I maintain my weight and stay well hydrated?**
 - Do not skip meals.
 - If you eat smaller amounts, try to eat more often.
 - Have protein at every meal and snack.
 - Drink plenty of water throughout the day.

You will meet with your nutritionist regularly to help you with your eating and drinking habits. If you cannot eat or drink, tell your doctor, technologist, nurse or nutritionist.

(4) Fever

- If you are also on chemotherapy, you are at increased risk of getting an infection.
- If you check your temperature and have a fever of **38.0°C for over one hour OR 38.3°C just once, go the Emergency Department.**

(5) Fatigue

- Fatigue, or feeling tired, is another 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 your 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.

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 if there is an emergency?

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

- Weekdays from 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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