

# How to take care of yourself while receiving radiation therapy to the vulva, vagina or anus

## 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.

Most side effects start after the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of treatment. They may slowly progress during and up to 2 weeks after the end of 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.

You will be seen by a nurse at the beginning of the treatment. Your doctor will follow up with you every week or every other week while you are receiving radiation therapy. Your technologist will give you your treatment every day. You will also meet with a nutritionist. Ask any member of the team (doctor, technologist, nurse or nutritionist) 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).

### **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. If you take a bath, rinse with clean water after.
- b. Use lukewarm water.
- c. Use mild **unscented** soap.
  - Examples: 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. **Do not remove your skin markings.**
  - iii. Rinse well.
  - iv. Pat dry with a soft towel.

## 2) Keep the skin in the area being treated moisturized

a. Apply **unscented** cream or lotion **at least twice a day.**

- Examples: 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"><li>✓ Wear loose-fitting clothes with soft, natural fibers such as cotton.</li><li>✓ Change your underwear every day.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✗ Do not rub, scrub, or scratch the skin being treated.</li><li>✗ Do not shave the area being treated.</li><li>✗ Do not use wipes.</li><li>✗ Do not use sanitary pads or diapers unless you need to.</li><li>✗ Do not use talc, corn starch, or baby powder.</li><li>✗ Do not apply anything hot or cold to the skin being treated. This means not using heating pads, ice packs, hot tubs, or hot water when you wash.</li><li>✗ Do not swim. It can irritate your skin and erase the markings.</li></ul>

## What do 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.**
  - Instead of washing with your hand, you can just let the soap from washing above run down over the area.
  - You can do sitz baths or pour water over the area from a bottle after using the toilet.
    - A sitz bath is soaking the area in lukewarm water. To make a sitz bath:
      - Fill a sitz bath container that fits over the toilet with lukewarm water or fill a bathtub with enough water to sit in.

- Soak for 5-10 minutes 4 times a day or after using the toilet.
- 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) Changes in bowel movements (stools)**

- The radiation therapy may irritate your intestines, which can lead to changes in your bowel movements (stools).
- You may have some of the symptoms below:
  - Diarrhea (liquid stools)
  - Cramps
  - Urgency (feeling like you have to go to the bathroom right away with no time to wait)
  - Feeling like you have to go to the bathroom (stools) when you don't really need to
  - Constipation (trouble passing stools)
- Each person can have different side effects. If you have any of these symptoms, tell your technologist. You will meet with a nurse, nutritionist, or doctor. They will explain what to do to manage these symptoms.

## **(3) Cystitis**

- Radiation cystitis is an inflammation (irritation) of the bladder from the radiation.
- You may have some of the symptoms below:
  - The need to urinate (pee) more often
  - Pain while you urinate
  - Blood in your urine
  - Urgency (feeling like you have to go to the bathroom right away with no time to wait)
  - Feeling like you have to urinate when you don't really need to
  - Leaking or trouble controlling your urine
- Each person can have different side effects. If you have any of these symptoms, tell your technologist. You will meet with a nurse or doctor. They will explain what to do to manage these symptoms.

#### **(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) Loss of appetite**

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

#### **(6) 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.

## Can the radiation therapy affect my sex life?

- Radiation therapy to the pelvis (the part of the body between the hips, which includes the vagina, vulva, and anus) can cause changes to your sex life and ability to have children after treatment. Your doctor will have discussed this with you. If you have any questions, let us know.
- During treatment:
  - You can have sex if you want, unless your doctor has told you not to. It is safe for your partner, as radiation therapy does not make you radioactive.
  - If you are also on chemotherapy, use a condom to prevent your partner from coming into contact with small amounts of chemotherapy in your body's fluids.
  - Use birth control to prevent pregnancy. Ask your doctor or nurse if you have questions about reliable birth control options.
  - If you have irritation, avoid penetration (putting anything in the vagina or anus), oral sex or touching. Other types of activities, like kissing and hugging, are okay. It is important to communicate with your partner about any discomfort you may feel.
  - Side effects or feeling stressed may make you less interested or worried about sex. You do not have to have sex if you don't want to. If you have a partner, talk to them about how you feel.

## 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](mailto: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](http://cancer.ca) — Canadian Cancer Society

[fqc.qc.ca](http://fqc.qc.ca) — Quebec Cancer Foundation

[cansupport.ca/cancer-online-information](http://cansupport.ca/cancer-online-information) — Cedars CanSupport, information by topic

[cancer.net](http://cancer.net) — American Society of Clinical Oncology

[cancer.gov](http://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](mailto: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 medical care. Contact a qualified healthcare practitioner if you have any questions concerning your care.

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