

Radiation to the Chest and Spine

What you need to know

As it works to rid your body of cancer cells, radiation therapy can cause side effects in the treated area. Most side effects begin after two or three weeks of treatment. Report any side effects you experience to your radiation oncology team. This brochure provides information about how to minimize and treat side effects.

Skin reaction

Skin reaction is an expected side effect of radiation to the chest area. Initially, this reaction may appear as pinkness, dryness or itching of the skin. You may lose some hair on your chest in the area of your radiation treatment.

Here's how to care for your skin in the treated area:

- Use non-deodorant, non-perfumed soap such as unscented *Dove* or *Basis*. Gently cleanse (don't scrub) the treatment area and pat dry. Don't rub the markings on your skin.
- Apply the cream recommended by your radiation nurse or physician to the treatment area once a day initially. If your skin becomes dry or irritated, you may use the cream two to four times per day. Don't rub the cream on your markings, but do apply the lotion inside the marked area. Don't apply the cream within four hours before your treatment.
- Don't apply heat or ice packs/pads directly to skin in the treated area.
- You'll be sensitive to sunburn in the treated area, so wear clothing that covers it and don't expose that skin to the sun. After you've completed your treatment and your skin has healed, you may expose it to sun, but use a sunblock of SPF 30 or higher and reapply it frequently. Your skin may be sensitive to sunburn in the treated area for up to a year after radiation is completed.

Heartburn or Difficulty Swallowing

Radiation to the chest or spine may cause heartburn or discomfort in your chest when you swallow food or drink liquids. To help alleviate these symptoms, try this:

- Eat soft, bland foods that are easy to swallow, such as pudding, eggs, yogurt, macaroni, applesauce, ice cream and cottage cheese.
- If you are unable to eat soft foods, drink high-calorie nutritional shakes, such as *Carnation Instant Breakfast*, *Ensure Plus* or *Boost Plus*.
- Avoid spicy foods.
- Avoid acidic foods, such as tomatoes, oranges or grapefruit.
- Avoid foods that are coarse or dry, such as bread, chips, cake or crackers.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine.

- You may take a liquid antacid such as *Mylanta* after meals to soothe your esophagus. Don't eat or drink for at least one hour after taking a liquid antacid. Follow the label directions for the correct dosage.
- If you're normally prone to have heartburn or reflux, take an acid reducer, such as *Prilosec* or *Prevacid*.
- Notify your nurse if you're having difficulty eating or drinking due to pain or discomfort.

Fatigue

During the last few weeks of your treatment, you may experience some generalized fatigue. You may need additional rest. Try these strategies to fight fatigue:

- Balance activity with rest. If you feel tired, take a brief nap, if possible, or put your feet up briefly, then resume your activity.
- Drink six to eight, eight-ounce glasses of non-caffeinated beverages each day.
- Stay active. Walking is a non-stressful activity that may help fatigue.

Nutrition

Good nutrition is important. Try to eat three balanced meals each day. Don't try to diet or lose weight during treatment and don't skip meals. If you lose weight, a nurse will discuss your diet with you. If you need guidance about what makes a balanced meal, please discuss this with a nurse.

You may take a multivitamin but do not take vitamin E or vitamin C tablets.

Important Note: While you're undergoing radiation therapy, pregnancy is not advised. If you're not sure if you're pregnant or think you might be, please report this to your radiation therapy physician immediately.

Questions? Ask Us.

Remember: Report any side effects to the Radiation Oncology staff.

If you have concerns or questions, please ask them during your treatment appointment. If you need to speak with someone urgently, please call:

- Monday - Friday, 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Radiation Oncology Center at 314-251-6844
- After hours, to reach a physician call 314-663-3011



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