



Government of **Western Australia**
North Metropolitan Health Service
Sir Charles Gairdner Osborne Park Health Care Group



Brain treatment

Radiation Oncology

Patient information



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Contents

Introduction	3
Possible reactions	3
Steroid therapy	6
Chemotherapy	7
Pregnancy	7
Emotional wellbeing	9
Follow-up appointment	9
Further support	10



Introduction

Radiation therapy is often given to patients with cancerous or non-cancerous tumours that arise within the head area. It may be used alone or in conjunction with other types of treatment, such as surgery or chemotherapy.

Treatment involves a series of outpatient treatments given for up to five days a week over several weeks. It is painless and although the appointment times may be for 10 to 20 minutes in duration, the treatment itself only takes a few minutes.

The treatment varies from patient to patient and invariably causes some reactions within the body's normal tissues. Your radiation oncologist, a specialist doctor who uses radiation therapy in the treatment of cancer patients, will explain these to you in more detail.

This brochure outlines common side effects and suggest ways to minimise them. If required, your doctor will prescribe medications to soothe reactions that may take place.

You may have a mask made which you will need to wear for your CT (computed tomography) planning appointment and every treatment. This helps to ensure that you are in the same position each day and makes the treatment quicker and more accurate.

Possible reactions

When radiation therapy is delivered, it has to pass through normal structures to reach the treatment area. As a result, reactions in normal tissues within the treatment area can be expected to occur to some degree.

Individual patients will have different reactions, depending on the site to be treated, the dose given, the number of treatments and their overall health. Reactions may also be influenced to a greater extent by other forms of treatment given; for example, reactions are likely to be greater if chemotherapy is given at the same time as radiation therapy.

Usually, reactions would not be expected until the second or third week of treatment. They are likely to persist throughout the treatment and subside a couple of weeks after treatment is completed.

You will have regular reviews during your treatment. These appointment times will be included in your treatment schedule. In between the review appointments you are encouraged to mention any treatment-related issues that you have with the radiation therapists or nursing staff, who will be able to offer advice or refer you to the appropriate person/area.

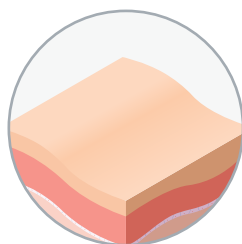
Common side-effects include:



Headaches and/or swelling



Hair loss



Skin and scalp reactions



Fatigue



Headaches and/or swelling

Radiation causes cells to lose their ability to regulate fluids, which sometimes results in swelling. When this occurs within the brain it can result in unpleasant symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, speech changes and, more rarely, nausea, vomiting or seizures.

These symptoms may occur quite early in the treatment and can be managed with a course of low-dose steroids, or an alteration to the dosage if you are already taking them. Additionally, anti-sickness drugs and analgesics can be prescribed by your radiation oncologist if required.

Please let the radiation therapists, nurses or radiation oncologist know if any of these symptoms occur.

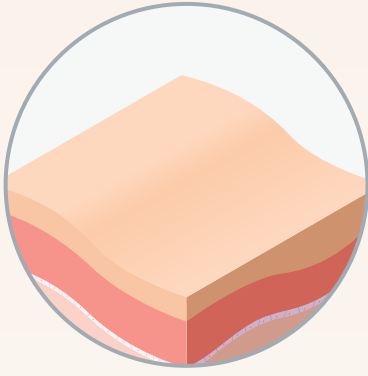


Hair loss

It is likely that you will lose your hair within the treatment area. Most hair loss is temporary, but in some people it may be permanent. Please discuss this likelihood with your doctor, as this will depend on the dose and number of treatments you have. The radiation therapists can show you where your hair loss is likely to be.

Hair loss generally occurs two to three weeks into treatment and, once started, can occur quite rapidly. It may take three to six months after treatment for hair to regrow and sometimes the regrowth may be patchy. Hair may grow back a different colour, texture and even thickness.

Please ask a member of the nursing team about vouchers that can be used for wigs and hair accessories.



Skin and scalp reactions

Some degree of reddening (erythema) usually develops in the treated area about 10 to 14 days after the first treatment. Reactions are generally mild and present like sunburn, which can be relieved by a soothing cream. There may be some mild darkening in pigmentation of the skin. Your radiation therapist can indicate where the reactions are likely to occur.

The following suggestions may help minimise reactions:

- Gently wash skin in the treatment area with lukewarm water and a non-perfumed gentle soap such as Simple soap, Unscented Dove, or a non-soap wash such as QV wash.
- Gently pat the skin dry using a soft towel – do not rub.
- Avoid exposure of the affected area to direct sunlight. Wear a loose hat outside.
- Avoid very hot showers/baths.
- Do not apply any creams/lotions/talc other than that provided/ approved by Radiation Oncology staff.
- Hair may be washed once or twice a week using a small amount of a gentle, non-perfumed shampoo such as Simple Shampoo or Pinetarsol. Do not rub the hair vigorously.

You will have regular skin checks during your treatment. However, please report to a nurse, radiation therapist or your doctor if you experience itching, irritation or blistering, so that extra care and advice can be given.

Your skin will be more susceptible to sun damage after radiotherapy. Clothing that protects the skin against direct sunlight is recommended for 18 months to two years after treatment. A maximum sun block lotion (at least SPF+30) is recommended after this time and care to avoid burning should always be exercised.



Fatigue

Fatigue associated with treatment can occur at any time during the treatment, but in general usually develops as the course of radiation therapy progresses. There can be many causes, but the main one is your body requires extra energy to heal healthy cells.

Daily travelling, working and running a household can also contribute to this tiredness. You may find that you generally slow down and don't have as much energy. This tiredness may be worse if you are also having chemotherapy.

Ensure you have adequate sleep, allow time to rest and drink plenty of fluids. Mild forms of exercise, such as walking, can be beneficial, especially if you make it social by involving friends or family. There are exercise programs that benefit patients with fatigue. Please ask staff for further information.

This tiredness may continue for a period after you have finished your course of radiation therapy, but this is normal.



Steroid therapy

Steroids, such as Dexamethasone, may be prescribed to decrease side effects such as swelling in the brain or nausea and vomiting associated with some chemotherapy drugs. If a steroid has been prescribed for you it is important that you do not miss a dose. Please make sure that you take the steroid with food or after meals.

Occasionally people get side effects such as increased appetite, irritability, difficulty sleeping and fluid retention. Less common side effects are headaches, dizziness and mood swings.

If you experience these side effects, or need advice on when to take the tablets, please discuss this with your nurse or doctor.



Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy can be recommended in addition to surgery and radiation therapy. Reactions to chemotherapy vary for each individual - your doctor will discuss this in detail with you.

If there is any change to your chemotherapy schedule, it is important that you make the staff in Radiation Oncology aware of this immediately.



Pregnancy

It is strongly recommended that women use a reliable form of birth control during and shortly after treatment. Radiation therapy can be harmful to the unborn baby. Please inform a staff member immediately if you suspect that you may be pregnant.



Emotional wellbeing

It is completely normal for you to feel emotional for some time after the diagnosis of cancer. Sleeping, eating and mood disturbances are all quite common under these circumstances.

Try spending time with people that make you feel good. Relax and do things you enjoy. Try to exercise regularly and say no to those activities you don't feel like doing.

Tell the radiation therapists or nursing team if you feel you are having difficulty coping with your diagnosis, treatment, domestic and travel arrangements or finances. They will organise for you to see trained professionals as needed.

Follow-up appointment

When radiation therapy is completed, your doctor will organise a follow-up appointment. If you experience any problems related to your treatment after the completion of treatment and before your follow-up appointment, please contact the department on (08) 6383 3000, Monday to Friday from 8am to 4pm.

This brochure discusses common problems or reactions that may occur when having radiation therapy to the head area. Not all reactions described will occur in every situation and every attempt will be made to reduce or relieve any reactions.

For further clarification or information on the treatment side effects outlined in this brochure, feel free to ask any of the radiation therapists, nurses, or your doctor or registrar.

Further support

There are many services offering support to people undergoing cancer treatments.

These include:

Look Good Feel Better

Free call: 1800 650 960

Website: www.lgfb.org.au

Look Good, Feel Better is a free workshop run by professionals from the cosmetics industry for women. The practical workshop covers skincare, make-up and headwear demonstrations and participants receive a complimentary Confidence Kit full of skincare and make-up products.

Experienced volunteers from the beauty industry help show how to manage the changes that may occur to the skin, hair and general appearance as a result of treatment.

Workshops are run frequently in the Radiation Oncology Department. Please speak to the radiation therapists or nursing staff if you are interested in attending.

WA Psycho-Oncology Service

Phone: (08) 6457 1177

Email: wapos@health.wa.gov.au

This service is available to adult Western Australians diagnosed with cancer. Clinical psychologists apply psychological theory and evidenced-based assessment and treatment strategies to help people address their needs and meet their goals. You may self-refer or ask a health professional to refer you.

Cancer Council WA

Phone: 131 120

Website: www.cancerwa.asn.au

The charity works across every area of every cancer, from research to prevention and support, assisting people from diagnosis through treatment and beyond.



Healthdirect

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

This free 24-hour health service offers general guidance for patients, including symptoms, diagnosis and treatment options.

Solaris Cancer Care

Phone: (08) 6383 3475

Website: <https://solariscancercare.org.au>

DD block,
Ground floor,
Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital,
Hospital Avenue, Nedlands

Solaris Cancer Care provides up-to-date, practical, evidence-based information on complementary integrative approaches to cancer management, disease prevention, health and wellbeing activities and support services that are designed to help people feel and cope better with their cancer and treatment.

Cancer Australia

Phone: 1800 624 973

Website: www.canceraustralia.gov.au

Established by the Australian Government to benefit Australians affected by cancer. Brain Tumour Alliance Australia

Brain Tumour Alliance Australia

Phone: 1800 857 221

Website: www.btaa.org.au

Cancer Network WA

Phone: (08) 6457 0855

Website: [North Metropolitan Health Service - Cancer Network WA](#)

References

1. <https://www.eviq.org.au/radiation-oncology/neurological>
2. <http://chemocare.com/chemotherapy/drug-info/dexamethasone.aspx>
3. <https://www.eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers/radiotherapy-patient-information-sheets/3101-skin-changes-and-skin-care-during-radiotherap>

Radiation Oncology

Cancer Centre

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Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm



The information provided is for information purposes only. If you are a patient using this publication, you should seek assistance from a healthcare professional when interpreting these materials and applying them to your individual circumstances.

