



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



# Pelvis treatment

## Radiation Oncology

Patient information



**NM**



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## Introduction

Radiation therapy is often given to patients with cancers that arise in the pelvic region. This may be given 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 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 as they are specific to the area of the pelvis receiving treatment.

This brochure outlines common side effects and suggests ways to minimise them. If required, your radiation oncologist will prescribe medications to soothe reactions that may occur.

## 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.

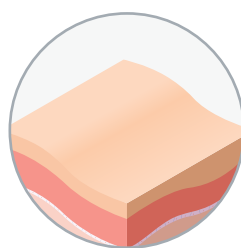
## Common side-effects include:



Bowel/rectum  
reactions



Bladder reactions

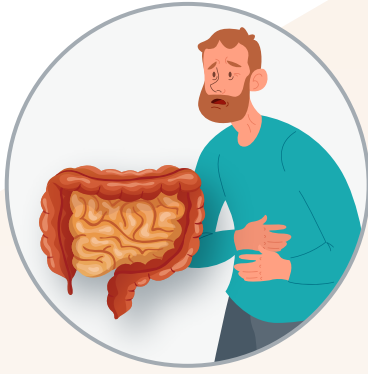


Skin and perineum  
reactions



Fatigue





## **Bowel/rectum reactions**

The bowel and rectum are particularly sensitive to radiation. Reactions will depend on the exact site of treatment in the pelvic area and how much, if any, of the bowel or rectum is within the treatment area.

### **Possible reactions to the bowel and rectum include:**

- Diarrhoea
- Increased bowel frequency
- Rectal urgency
- Blood or mucus in your stools
- Pain.

Loose motions and diarrhoea may be due to pelvic radiotherapy or other factors, including anxiety, infection, change in diet or medication. Please eat your usual diet from the start of your treatment, making changes only when problems develop. If you have any of the symptoms listed above, please tell your radiation therapist, nurse or doctor so they can give you advice or medication if required.

### **General advice for bowel irritation/diarrhoea**

- Remain hydrated: drink 1 to 2 litres of clear liquids throughout the day
- Try eating 5 to 6 small meals instead of 3 larger ones
- Stick to easily digested foods such as bananas, boiled potatoes, rice, pasta, white bread, steamed chicken, white fish, eggs or jelly.

### **Foods to avoid**

- Fatty, fried or spicy foods
- Milk and dairy products
- Drinks with caffeine or alcohol
- Raw fruit and vegetables
- Nuts, legumes and cereals.

Once your bowels return to normal it is important that you resume a balanced diet that includes fresh fruits, vegetables and wholegrain cereals. If the diarrhoea does not improve and continues to get worse, there is a risk of becoming dehydrated. Please inform a member of staff immediately if you are worried. If it is out of hours, please make a GP appointment or go to the Emergency Department.



### **Bladder reactions**

The bladder may be in the radiation field because the tumour is situated in the bladder, or it may be unavoidably treated because the tumour is in close proximity.

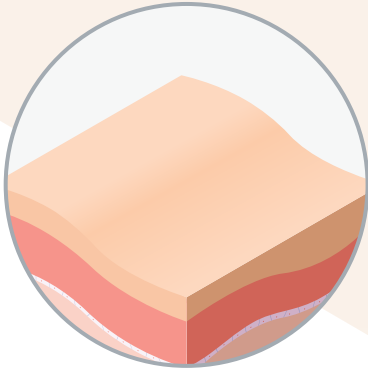
### **Possible reactions to the bladder include:**

- Bladder spasms
- Painful or difficult urination
- Excessive urination at night
- Increased frequency
- Incontinence
- Urgency
- Retention.

### **These problems may settle spontaneously, but the suggestions below may help.**

- Drink plenty of water and remain hydrated throughout the day.
- Avoid irritants such as alcohol and caffeine.
- The burning sensation can be helped by drinking a urine alkaliser such as Ural. Please ask a nurse for more information.

Please let your radiation therapist, nurse or doctor know if symptoms worsen or become unmanageable. Occasionally, medication may be prescribed to alleviate some symptoms.



## Skin 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.
- Start moisturising with Sorbolene (or similar) cream provided as soon as treatment begins. Apply the cream twice a day to the entire treatment area and gently massage into the skin until absorbed. If you have not been given this cream, please ask the radiation therapists or nursing staff. Alternative soothing creams will be provided if the area becomes itchy or sore.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes. Tight clothing can irritate the affected areas.
- Avoid exposure of the affected area to direct sunlight.
- When swimming outdoors, always cover the treatment area with a cotton T-shirt or rashie. If you do wish to swim in a chlorinated pool, it is advisable to shower and change into dry clothes as soon as possible after your swim. Swimming in chlorinated pools may worsen the skin reaction. If this happens, please ask the radiation therapist or nurse whether it is advisable to continue swimming.

**For perineum reactions,** a referral can be made to an occupational therapist to organise a special cushion to help relieve pressure on the region. Please speak to a nurse for more information.

You will have regular skin checks during your treatment. However, please report to a nurse, radiation therapist or 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.



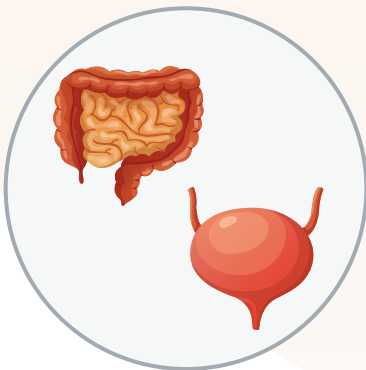
## Fatigue

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 of time after you have finished your course of radiation therapy, but this is normal.



## Bowel/bladder preparation

You may be required to follow specific bowel emptying and bladder filling/emptying instructions prior to your radiation treatment each day. It is important you follow these personalised instructions carefully as they are designed to help minimise any possible reactions during treatment.

Please alert a radiation therapist if you have not been given an information sheet on bladder and bowel preparation.



## 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 and fertility**

Radiotherapy to the area surrounding your reproductive organs can cause temporary or permanent fertility problems. It is important to discuss this with your radiation oncologist.

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

For men, if you are sexually active and your female partner is fertile, please continue to use a reliable form of contraception while undergoing treatment.



## **Sexual health**

Sexual health can be a very private matter so you may feel embarrassed to discuss it with medical professionals. If you have any questions or concerns, it is important to raise them with your radiation oncologist or nurse as they will be able to give you more information or refer you to the appropriate health professionals.

If you're a male having radiotherapy to the pelvis, it is possible that you may experience erectile problems or impotence afterwards. If you are concerned, please discuss with your radiation oncologist.



## **Vaginal dilators**

Vaginal dilators may be recommended for women who have radiotherapy to the pelvis. A possible side effect of radiation treatment is scar tissue formation. If the walls of the vagina are not separated at regular intervals when healing is taking place, the vagina can close. A fused vagina makes pelvic examinations and sexual intercourse difficult and painful. This side effect can be lessened by using a vaginal dilator/cylinder. Your nurse will educate you about the use of vaginal dilators/cylinders if appropriate.



## 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 skin. 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](http://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](mailto: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](http://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](http://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](http://www.canceraustralia.gov.au)

Established by the Australian Government to benefit Australians affected by cancer.

### Fertility Preservation Options

Website: <https://www.cancer.org.au/clinical-guidelines/cancer-fertility-preservation>





## References

1. <https://www.eviq.org.au/radiation-oncology/colorectal>
2. <https://www.eviq.org.au/radiation-oncology/urogenital/bladder>
3. <https://www.eviq.org.au/radiation-oncology/urogenital/prostate>
4. <https://www.eviq.org.au/radiation-oncology/gynaecological>
5. <https://www.eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers/patient-information-sheets/3097-diarrhoea-during-cancer-treatment>
6. <https://www.eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers/radiotherapy-patient-information-sheets/3101-skin-changes-and-skin-care-during-radiotherap>

## Radiation Oncology

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Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm



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