



Pelvis Treatment Information Booklet

Radiation Oncology

For all enquiries phone: (08) 6383 3000



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Introduction

Radiation therapy is often given to patients with cancers that arise in the pelvic region. This may be in conjunction with other types of treatment such as surgery or chemotherapy.

Treatment involves a series of outpatient treatments given up to 5 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 as they are specific to the area of the pelvis receiving treatment.

This booklet will discuss common side effects and suggest ways to minimise them. If required, your radiation oncologist/doctor will prescribe medications to soothe reactions that may take place.



Possible reactions

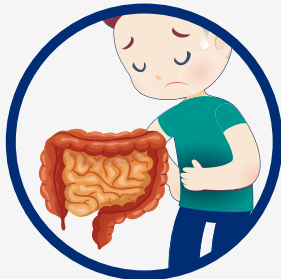
When radiation therapy is delivered, the treatment has to pass through normal structures to reach the treatment area. As a result, reactions in normal tissues within the treatment area can be expected to occur to some degree. Individual patients will have different degrees of reaction depending on the 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, e.g. reactions are likely to be greater if chemotherapy is given at the same time as radiotherapy.

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

You will have regular reviews during the course of your treatment and 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:

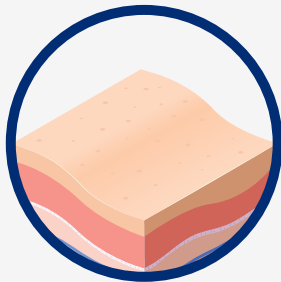
1. Bowel/rectum reactions



2. Bladder reactions



3. Skin and perineum reactions



4. Fatigue



1. 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 that 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 as they will 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 which 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.



2. Bladder reactions

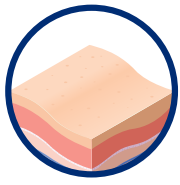
The bladder may be in the radiation field because the tumour is situated in the bladder, or it may be unavoidably treated because the tumour is in close proximity. Possible reactions include:

- ▶ 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.



3. Skin and perineum reactions

Some degree of reddening (erythema) usually develops in the treated area approximately 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.

Depending on the pelvic area being treated, there is a chance that a skin reaction will occur in the perineum (genital/anal region). If you are unsure 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
- ▶ When you commence treatment, start moisturising with the Sorbolene (or similar) cream provided. Apply the cream twice a day to the entire treatment area and gently massage into the skin until it is 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 as 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 therapists or nurses whether it is advisable to continue swimming if your skin reaction appears to worsen.

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. Shading from direct sunlight by clothing is recommended for a period of 18 months to 2 years after treatment. A maximum sun block lotion (at least SPF 30) is recommended and care to avoid burning should always be exercised



4. Fatigue

Fatigue associated with treatment can occur at any time during the treatment, but 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, make sure you 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 are evidenced to benefit patients with fatigue. Please ask the 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 a "Bladder and Bowel Preparation" information sheet.

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.

You can try spending time with those 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.

You should tell the radiation therapists or nursing team if you feel you are having difficulty coping with your diagnosis and treatment. Financial help or help with travel arrangements can be discussed with a social worker or welfare officer. Please discuss with the nurses.

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.

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.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy can be recommended in addition to surgery and radiation therapy. Specific reactions can occur in relation to the use of chemotherapy and as they will vary for each individual, these will be discussed in detail with your medical oncologist.

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

Follow up

When radiation therapy is completed your radiation oncologist will organise a follow-up appointment. If you experience any problems related to your treatment after completion and before your follow-up appointment, please contact the department by phoning (08) 6383 3000, Monday to Friday from 8:00am to 4:00pm.

This booklet discusses common problems or reactions that may occur when having radiation therapy to the pelvis area. Not all of the 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 booklet please feel free to ask any of the radiation therapists, nurses or your doctor.



Further support and health information:

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 makeup 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

Telephone: 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.

The Cancer Council

Telephone: 131120
Website: www.cancerwa.asn.au/patients

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

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>

Health Direct

Telephone: 1800 022 222
Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

General guidance for patients: symptoms, diagnosis, treatment options and available services. 24-hour health advice.

Solaris Cancer Care

Telephone: 08 6383 3475
Website: <https://solariscancercare.org.au/>
SCGH DD block, Ground floor Hospital Avenue, Nedlands

Solaris Cancer Care provides up-to-date, practical, evidence informed 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

Telephone: 1800 624 973
Website: www.canceraustralia.gov.au

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

Fertility Preservation Options

Website: www.canteen.org