RADIATION THERAPY TO THE VULVA
Disclaimer
This is general information developed by The Ottawa Hospital. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified health-care provider. Please consult your health-care provider who will be able to determine the appropriateness of the information for your specific situation.
Your doctor has prescribed radiation therapy to your vulva. You will be having radiation treatments five days a week. Radiation therapists will be administering your daily treatments. You may also see the radiation oncology nurse during your treatment and your radiation oncologist will see you weekly. Further skin care instructions will be provided on your last day of treatment.

If you have concerns or questions, please discuss them with your radiation therapy team. They are here to help you in the following weeks.

**Smoking**

Patients are encouraged to stop smoking or at least not to smoke during treatment. Smoking increases side effects and decreases the effectiveness of your treatment. If you are having difficulties stopping smoking please talk to your health care team.

*Please note that the following is a list of acute, or short-term, temporary reactions to your radiation treatment. Please discuss possible long-term effects of your treatment with your radiation oncologist.*

**POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS**

**SKIN REACTIONS**

You will develop a skin reaction in the area being treated with radiation. This will most likely occur after the first 2-3 weeks of treatment. You may experience discomfort, itchiness, tenderness, swelling, reddening and open sores. Your radiation therapy team will explain which areas of your skin may be affected. The severity of the reaction is dependent upon your skin type (sensitivity to radiation), the area being treated and the
dose and number of treatments prescribed. Use the following guidelines to minimize any skin reaction you may experience.

**MANAGEMENT**  
(Applies to treatment area only)

The guidelines below are to be used beginning on the first day of your radiation treatment and are to be continued for a minimum of two weeks after finishing all of your radiation treatments or until your skin has healed completely. Further skin care instructions will be provided on your last day of treatment.

**Washing instructions**

- Wash treated area gently once a day. Use only mild soap containing:
  - Moisturizing agents
  - No scents or perfumes
- Use only lukewarm water when bathing or showering. Avoid long hot soaks in the tub.
- If possible, the shower setting should be adjusted to low pressure.
- Do not use a wash cloth. Instead, use your bare hand to gently wash the treated area.
- Do not remove any non-permanent skin markings.
- Air dry or gently pat skin with a soft cotton towel after bathing. A hair blower can be used but only on the cool setting. Do not rub skin in the area being treated.
Other General Guidelines

- **Cavilon®**: Apply 3M® Cavilon® Barrier Film to lower pelvic area daily. A radiation therapist or nurse will show you how to apply it. You do not need a prescription for Cavilon®. It can be found at most pharmacies.

- **Keep dry**: Keep lower pelvic area dry and open to the air as much as possible

- For most patients, regular use of toilet paper will not be a problem. Some patients, however, may find the skin around their vulva and anus becomes tender. This may occur after 2-3 weeks of treatment. If dry toilet paper begins to irritate the vulvar and anal areas, the following may provide relief:
  - A soft wet cloth may be less irritating than dry toilet paper.
  - A squeezable bottle filled with warm water (directed front to back) may also be used instead of toilet paper after bowel movements or urinating to cleanse the skin and to help minimize skin reactions. Allow the area to air dry before dressing.
  - Personal cleansing wipes may also be used. The cleansing wipes should be:
    - Alcohol-free
    - Fragrance-free
    - Hypo-allergenic
  - Sitz baths may be recommended to reduce discomfort and to cleanse the area after bowel movements if applicable. Limit the sitz baths to a 5 minute soak. Discontinue if open weeping wounds develop.

- **Irritants**: Avoid any irritants such as perfumes, body sprays, etc.

- **Hair removal**: Avoid shaving and do not use waxes or other hair removal products in the treatment area until treatment is complete and the skin has fully healed

- **Feminine products**: Avoid the use of tampons, scented pads or feminine sprays.
• **Scratching:** Do not scratch itchy skin within the treatment area.

• **Temperatures:** Avoid exposing skin in the treatment area to temperature extremes (ice packs, heating pads, hot/cold/wet compresses, hot waxing, saunas and hot tubs, etc.).

• **Bandages:** Avoid Band Aid® type bandages and adhesive tapes on treated skin.

• **Clothing:** Wear soft, breathable, loose fitting clothing and avoid tight fitting or compression undergarments in the treated area (including tights and nylons).

• **Swimming:** Swimming is not recommended for the duration of your radiation treatments and until your skin has completely healed

### What to do if your skin reaction worsens

- Your skin reaction will be monitored by your radiation therapy team. When your skin becomes itchy or you develop open weeping wounds in the treatment area, discontinue the use of Cavilon® and inform your radiation therapist. At this point, you will be advised to use aluminum acetate soaks and a prescribed cream in the affected area. Use Aluminum Acetate soaks 3-4 times daily for a soothing, cleansing and drying effect. Aluminum Acetate powder can be purchased from most pharmacies. Common brand names are Buro Sol® and Domoboro®. Some pharmacies will also be able to compound a solution for you. Check with your pharmacist for more information. Follow the simple instructions below to prepare and apply the soaks. You should make a new container of solution each day:
  - Boil water (1 litre or 4 cups)
  - Add a sachet or 3 scoops of powder to water
  - Let the solution cool to room temperature
  - Soak a clean soft cloth with the solution
  - Lightly squeeze out excess fluid
• Gently apply soaked cloth to affected area
• Do not rub the area with the soaked cloth
• Leave the soaked cloth on the area for 5-10 minutes
• Gently remove the cloth and allow area to air dry. A hair blower can be used but only on the cool setting
• Once the skin is dry, apply the prescribed cream to the affected area as directed.
• Follow these instructions until the skin in the affected area is healed. This may take up to 6 weeks.

Your skin reaction may increase in severity 1-2 weeks following treatments. **You are advised to follow all skin care guidelines listed above for 2 weeks following the end of your radiation treatments or until your skin has healed completely.** You can contact your radiation oncology nurse (613-737-7700 ext. ) in the first two weeks after treatment if you are concerned with the condition of your skin. Following this two weeks period after the end of treatment, you are to contact your patient designated nurse with any questions related to side effects. Contact information will be provided on your last day of treatment.

**DIARRHEA AND CRAMPING**

If radiation passes through bowel you may experience changes in the frequency or consistency of your bowel movements which may lead to diarrhea and cramping. Diarrhea is most commonly described as loose, frequent, watery bowel movements which may be accompanied by gas and bloating. These symptoms may occur 2-3 weeks into your treatment. Please notify your radiation therapy team as soon as you notice any changes in your normal bowel habits as early intervention is important. The following is a list of dietary changes you can make as soon as you experience loose bowel movements or an increase in the number of daily bowel movements.
Eating

• Use less roughage (fiber) in your diet. Avoid fruit and vegetable skins, seeds and membranes, whole grain breads and cereals, nuts and popcorn.

  Note: Oatmeal, peeled apples, pears, potatoes and other foods from the fruit/vegetable group are good sources of certain types of fiber that may help to alleviate diarrhea. A nutritional guidelines booklet containing other suggested foods is available.

• Potassium is an important element to your body and is lost in great quantities when you have diarrhea. Make sure you eat some foods that are high in potassium (but will not worsen diarrhea) such as bananas, apricot or peach nectar, potatoes, tomatoes or vegetable juice.

• Stay away from foods that may encourage gas or cramps such as carbonated drinks, beer, beans, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, highly spiced foods, too many sweets and sugarless chewing gum (containing sorbitol and mannitol).

• Try eating several small meals (6-7 meals per day) instead of three large meals.

Drinking

• Make sure you drink plenty of fluids, 6-8 glasses (10 oz) per day. Drink fluids between meals instead of with them.

• Minimize or avoid alcohol and caffeinated beverages such as coffee, tea, cola and energy drinks.

If your diarrhea and/or cramping lasts longer than 24 hours and these management strategies do not work, please notify your radiation therapy team right away. A dietician is available to assist you with diet management strategies. Please ask your radiation therapist, nurse or radiation oncologist for a referral if you do not already have one.
BLADDER IRRITATION

Radiation may cause irritation of the bladder 3-4 weeks into treatments. This may cause you to urinate more frequently. It may also cause burning or pain when urinating, difficulty urinating or an increase in the need or urge to urinate. Please advise your radiation therapy team if you experience any of these symptoms. Your radiation oncologist may prescribe medication to help with these symptoms.

MANAGEMENT

Eating and drinking
- Drink plenty of fluids such as water throughout the day and limit consumption of fluids in the evening.
- Limit or avoid foods which may worsen bladder irritation such as spicy foods, acidic foods including tomatoes, sugars and sweeteners.
- Reduce your intake of acidic juices, alcohol, carbonated drinks, coffee and teas with caffeine.

Other suggestions
- Avoid soaking in a bath tub, Jacuzzi or hot tub.
- Avoid powdered or perfumed personal hygiene products.
- Use a water-soluble lubricant during sexual intercourse. Women should empty their bladder after sexual intercourse.

HEMORRHOIDS

If you have had hemorrhoids in the past, they may flare up again during treatment. Please inform your radiation therapy team should you experience a flare up. The health care professionals involved in your care will provide you with strategies to help manage the itchiness and irritation from your hemorrhoids.
CHANGES TO THE VAGINA

If the vagina is in the area to be treated, radiation can cause inflammation and irritation of the vaginal wall. Please refrain for sexual intercourse during your treatment and until your skin has completely healed. A potential long term side effect of radiation is narrowing of the vagina due to a buildup of scar tissue. Regular sexual intercourse or the use of a dilator once your skin has completely healed can help to prevent and treat narrowing of the vagina. You will meet with a radiation therapist or nurse at the end of your treatment to discuss this in more detail.

RADIATION INDUCED FATIGUE

You may experience some level of fatigue during the course of your treatment. Fatigue is the feeling of being mentally and/or physically tired. You may already be feeling tired as it is one of the most common symptoms associated with cancer. This lack of energy can get in the way of your normal functioning making it harder to concentrate and bringing down your mood. Some patients may feel even more tired in the first two weeks following their radiation treatments. It may take a few weeks to return to how you felt before the treatments.

MANAGEMENT

• **Eating:** Eat a balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids.
• **Set priorities:** Continue with regular daily activities, however, only perform most important tasks if fatigue increases.
• **Rest:** Take short naps during the day if required. Aim to get the majority of your sleep at night.
• **Stay active:** Physical activity and exercise can help to minimize the effects of fatigue. Take a brisk 20-30min walk daily if you are able.
Let your radiation therapy team know if you are feeling very fatigued, sleepy, depressed or are having difficulty performing everyday tasks. Your Radiation Therapy Team can direct you to other resources as required.

OTHER SIDE EFFECTS

If you experience side effects other than those listed in this pamphlet, please notify your radiation therapy team and you will be referred to the appropriate health professional.

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