Radiation Therapy to the Female Pelvis

The Ottawa Hospital Cancer Centre
Disclaimer

This is general information developed by The Ottawa Hospital Cancer Centre. 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 pelvis. 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**

**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.

Management
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.

Skin Reactions

You may develop a skin reaction in the area being treated with radiation. This may occur after the first 2-3 weeks of treatment. You may experience discomfort, itchiness, tenderness, swelling, and reddening. 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 scrub the skin in the treatment area.
• Do not remove any non-permanent skin markings.
• Air dry or gently pat skin with a soft cotton towel after bathing. Avoid rubbing skin in the area being treated.

**Perianal Care**

For most patients, regular use of toilet paper will not be a problem. Some patients, however, may find the skin around their anus becomes tender. This may occur after 2-3 weeks of treatment, or as a side effect from frequent bowel movements. If dry toilet paper begins to irritate the perineal or perianal area 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 to cleanse the skin and to help minimize skin reactions between the buttocks. 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. If you have cancer of the anus or vulva limit the sitz baths to a 5 minute soak.
Other General Guidelines

• **Hydration** – A moisturizing lotion or cream may be applied to the treatment area after bathing and periodically throughout the day to moisturize the skin. Do not apply lotions or creams to the perineal or perianal area. The lotion or cream should contain:
  – **No** scents or perfumes
  – **No** Lanolin

Discontinue the use of the lotion or cream and inform your radiation therapy team if the skin starts to become itchy, dry or begins to break down or open.

• **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).

• **Sun and wind exposure:** Protect treated area from direct sunlight and wind exposure. Do not use sunscreen on the treated area during radiation treatments for 2 weeks after the completion of treatment. Once the skin has healed a sunscreen, with SPF of 30 or higher, should always be applied to the treated area when exposed due to permanent sensitivity to the sun.
• **Swimming:** Swimming may be allowed ONLY if the skin in the treatment area is intact. Please discuss with your radiation therapist whether or not swimming is advisable for you. Swimming is not recommended if you have cancer of the anus or vulva. Remove your wet swimsuit after swimming if it is in contact with the treated area and rinse your skin using the washing instructions mentioned above. Avoid swimming if you develop a skin reaction.

Your skin reaction will be monitored by your radiation therapy team. Should your skin become itchy or begin to breakdown, please inform your radiation therapist. 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.

**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. This can cause a decrease in vaginal lubrication and/or discomfort during sexual intercourse. Use a water-soluble lubricant during sexual intercourse. 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 can help to prevent and treat narrowing of the vagina. You will meet with a radiation therapist 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.

**Notes**

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