

Care After Radiation Therapy to the Cervical Spine Area

General Information

You have just finished radiation therapy for cancer. The radiation continues to work for weeks after your last treatment. Because of this, you may still feel side effects. Most side effects will improve over time.

Use the following information to help control side effects you may have. Call 612-863-4060 if you have questions about your recovery. Call 911 or go to your nearest hospital Emergency Department right away if you have an emergency.

Fatigue

You can expect to feel tired for about one month after your last treatment. After that time, your energy level will slowly improve.

- Take naps or rest during the day.
- Get good sleep every night.
- Save your energy. Decide which activities are most important to you and plan your day around them. Be sure to build in rest periods.

Skin Irritation

You may have skin irritation for several weeks after your last treatment.

- Wash the area gently. Use a mild hypoallergenic soap and warm water.
- Put the cream you received from the Radiation Oncology Department on the area. Gently rub the cream on all reddened areas twice a day or more often if needed.

- If you do not have enough of the lotion, ask for another tube. You may stop using the cream when your skin is no longer red or pink.
- You may use over-the-counter lotions such as Johnson's® Baby Lotion, Eucerin® Original Moisturizing Cream, Lubriderm® or Cetaphil®.
- Once your skin heals, you may use any rich, moisturizing lotion you choose.
- The skin in folds or creases may become more red and irritated than surrounding skin. This skin will take longer to heal.
- After the area has healed, your skin will continue to be more sensitive to sunlight. Protect the area by using sunscreen with an SPF 15 or higher. Wear clothing to cover the area.

Nutrition and Nausea

If you had nausea, a poor appetite or both during treatment, you may have these feelings for a few weeks after treatment. Good nutrition is important during your recovery.

- Maintain your weight by drinking high-calorie drinks and shakes. Drink nutritional supplements such as Ensure® or Sustacal® to make sure you get enough calories each day. You may also drink Carnation® Instant Breakfast® or sport shakes.
- If your doctor prescribed medicine to prevent nausea, take it as directed.

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- Eat small meals often during the day. Try eating 6 small meals instead of 3 large meals. If you feel nauseated after eating, sit up for about 1 hour to help digestion.
- Limit the liquids you drink with meals to 4 ounces.
- Avoid spicy or greasy foods.
- Avoid strong odors such as smoke, cooking smells or perfume.

Pain

- You may or may not have pain. If you do, be aware of when you have pain and what works best to relieve it. If your pain medicine stops working, call your doctor.
- Pain is easiest to manage when it is mild rather than when it is severe. Take your pain medicine as directed. Do not change your dose or medicine without talking with your doctor.
- Make sure you do not run out of your medicines. Contact your pharmacy if your prescriptions are getting low. You do not want to run out during weekends or holidays.
- If your pain begins to decrease, your doctor may reduce your dose or change your prescription.
- If your pain medicine causes side effects, talk with your doctor. If you have constipation, you may take over-the-counter laxatives or stool softeners such as Senokot® or Colace®.
- Your doctor may ask you to rate your pain on a scale of zero (no pain) to 10 (worse possible pain).

Ear Problems

Ear wax build-up can be common after radiation therapy. This may start several weeks after the last treatment and continue for many months.

Do not try to remove the wax yourself. Have a doctor remove the ear wax. Your doctor may prescribe ear drops to soften the wax before he or she is able to remove the wax. Use the drops as directed.

Sexual Activity

You may become more tired as your body goes through changes caused by radiation therapy. It is common for your sexual desire to be affected.

You may have sexual intercourse as long as it is comfortable. Remember, you are not “radioactive” and you cannot give your partner cancer.

Follow-up Care and Survivorship

It is very important that you continue your follow-up care with your doctors. You may need to have occasional lab work or scans during your recovery.

Your life and the lives around you have been affected by cancer in many ways. Resources may be helpful to you and your loved ones. For information on programs or support groups, contact:

- The Penny George Institute for Health and Healing: 612-863-4633
- Cancer Survivors Network: acscsn.org
- National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship: anceradvocacy.gov
- LIVESTRONG: livestrong.com.

For more information, please ask your nurse.