

# Radiation Therapy for Cancer in Your Spine



Allina Health

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**ABBOTT  
NORTHWESTERN  
HOSPITAL**



Your doctor has prescribed radiation therapy to treat cancer in your spine area. Radiation therapy uses high-energy radiation (X-rays) to shrink or destroy the tumor. Your other doctors may also suggest other treatments such as surgery, chemotherapy or hormone therapy.

## **About External Beam Radiation Therapy**

- The radiation therapy treatments are painless.
- You will not be radioactive in any way. You are of no risk to your loved ones.
- You will need 2 to 9 weeks of radiation.
- You will receive radiation therapy 5 days a week, Monday through Friday.
- Plan 30 minutes for each treatment appointment, but treatment time may be from 5 to 30 minutes.
- Your radiation oncologist will meet with you every week to monitor your progress.
- A radiation oncology nurse is available to answer your questions or concerns.
- Your radiation oncologist may be ordering blood counts on you every 1 to 3 weeks. Your hemoglobin, white blood counts and platelets will be checked.
- You will be weighed every week by your radiation therapist.
- Consider talking with others who have had or are going through radiation. There are a number of support groups for people who have cancer. Call the Virginia Piper Cancer Institute™ at 612-863-9633 for more information.

If you do not want to join a support group, a psychologist who works with cancer patients can meet with you. Ask your nurse for more information.

## During Your Treatment

The goal of radiation therapy is to destroy cancer cells. Healthy cells are also affected by the radiation. To decrease the risk to healthy cells, the radiation will be given in a way to reduce your exposure.

The radiation oncology staff will help you get through the treatments feeling the best you can, with the least amount of side effects. You will be watched closely during your treatments.

During each treatment you can expect the following.

- The radiation therapists will ask you to remove your clothing or bandages in the treatment area.
- The therapists will position you on the treatment table. They will use the marks made on your body during the planning session.
- You will be alone during the treatment. The therapists will watch you closely on a TV monitor and listen to you on an intercom.
- You may hear a buzz from the treatment machine (called a linear accelerator) when you are receiving the radiation.
- The treatment machine may give you radiation from different angles.
- Talk with your therapist, doctor or nurse if you have any questions or concerns about the radiation treatments, side effects or both.
- Your therapist will tell you when you are scheduled to have lab work done.

## Possible Side Effects

You will have the same amount of radiation every day. Radiation may have side effects. They may not begin with the first treatment and they may continue beyond your last treatment. The following are possible side effects you may have:

- **Fatigue:** Fatigue can result from your cancer treatment. Some people do not have fatigue and others may have fatigue in different degrees. Being tired can keep you from doing your normal activities. Contact your nurse if your fatigue significantly changes (or gets worse).
- To manage fatigue, you can:
  - Rest more than usual. However, too much rest can result in you having less energy.
  - Try to do your normal activities every day as much as possible.
  - Try to get some regular exercise (such as walking) every day. This will help your energy level and help you sleep at night.
  - Drink lots of liquids and eat well-balanced meals.
  - Take rest breaks between activities. Rest breaks will help you save your energy for the things you want to do. Let others help with meals, cleaning, errands or child care.
  - Do activities that you enjoy and that will make you feel good. Try to do activities you enjoy at least 3 times each week. Do not try to do more than you can manage.

- **Loss of appetite:** It is normal not to have much of an appetite at this time. It is important to maintain your weight. Losing weight means you are not eating enough and this may make you more tired. It may be helpful to eat 6 small meals each day instead of 3 large ones.

Drink 8 to 10 glasses of decaffeinated liquids each day. You may need high-calorie drinks to give you extra nutrition. You may get samples of these from the radiation oncology nurse or therapists.

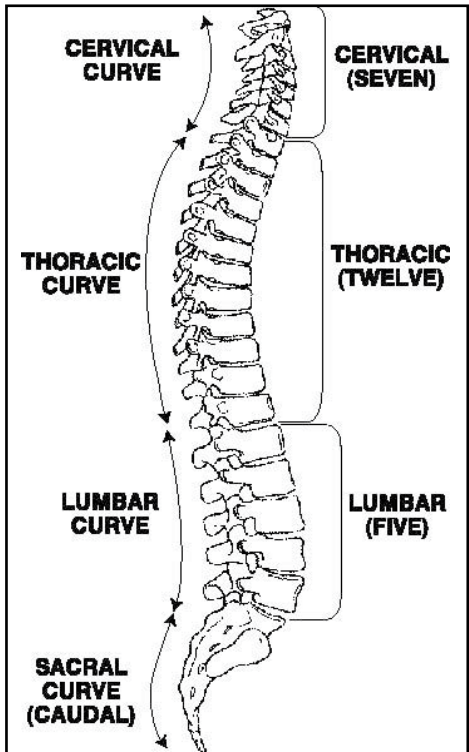
- **Pain:** You may have some discomfort from the cancer or the treatments. If your pain medicine is not working, please tell your therapist, doctor or nurse. Prescription pain medicine can cause constipation. Please see the nurse if you are having problems with constipation.
- **Skin irritation:** Skin irritation is common during radiation treatments. The radiation must pass through your normal skin cells to reach the cancer cells. This may cause your skin to become red, tender and irritated in the area being treated.

- Use a gentle soap or no soap when washing your treatment area.
- On your treatment area three to five times each day. This will keep your skin from becoming dry. It will also help your skin heal from the radiation side effects. Ask your nurse or therapist before using any other powder or cream.
- Keep the area treated out of the sun and covered at all times when you are outside.
- Ask your doctor or nurse before using hot or cold packs on your treatment area.
- Wear loose, soft clothing that is easy to remove. Avoid wearing clothing that will rub in the treatment area.

All of the other possible side effects depend on the area of your spine being treated. If different parts of your spine are being treated at the same time, you may have a combination of side effects.

The possible side effects in different areas of your spine may include:

- **Cervical spine (bones in your neck):** You may have a sore throat, problems swallowing or both. If your throat becomes sore, you may need medicine to relieve the discomfort. Please tell your therapist, nurse or doctor. You may find that food may become more difficult to swallow. Soft foods like yogurt, cottage cheese, scrambled eggs, pudding or foods with gravy may be easier to eat. Your nurse can help you identify some food that will work for you.



- **Thoracic spine (back bone from your neck to midback):** You may have problems swallowing and may have heartburn. The radiation can affect your esophagus (the tube that connects your mouth to your stomach) and cause it to be sore. You may find that food feels like it sticks in your chest. Drinking liquid between taking bites of food can reduce this feeling. You may also have nausea or feeling sick to your stomach. If you feel discomfort similar to heartburn or nausea, please tell your therapist, nurse or doctor. You may need medicine to relieve these side effects.
- **Lumbosacral spine (back bone from your midback to your tail bone):** If you get diarrhea, please talk with your doctor or nurse. You are at risk for dehydration (fluid loss) when you have diarrhea, so drinking enough liquids (8 glasses a day) is important. A change in your diet may help reduce diarrhea. Your nurse can give you instructions. You may also need medicine to control the diarrhea. If you feel any pelvic discomfort, tell your therapist, nurse or doctor.

## **Radiation Risks and Choices**

As with any medical treatment, radiation therapy has some long-term side effects and risks.

Long-term side effects can include:

- a change in your skin pigmentation (either a darkening or lightening of your skin) in the treatment area.

Long-term risks can include:

- Radiation therapy may not destroy all of the cancer, or the cancer may return. Talk with your doctor about what he or she expects from the treatment.
- Your radiation oncologist will review all other risks with you.



## **When Your Treatment Ends**

After your last radiation treatment, you may remove the marks on your body. You will be given more information when you finish the treatment. Sometimes the cancer will continue to shrink for several weeks after you finish your treatments.

## **Your Medicine Needs**

Please call the radiation oncology nurses 612-863-4060 at least 24 hours in advance if you need a refill on a prescription written by your radiation oncologist. Make sure you have enough medicine to last through the weekend. Most pain medicine refills cannot be called in to your pharmacy.

If you have prescriptions written by another doctor, please check with him or her for refill information.

## **Whom to Call for More Information**

If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, call the Radiation Oncology nurses at 612-863-6432. If you need to schedule or change an appointment, call 612-863-4060.

If you would like more information about your diagnosis, treatment options or support resources, you may call the National Cancer Institute at 1-800-4-CANCER ([nci.nih.gov](http://nci.nih.gov)) or the American Cancer Society at 1-800-ACS-2345 ([cancer.org](http://cancer.org)).

If you have any questions about your general health not related to the radiation, please call your regular doctor.







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