

# Care After Radiation Therapy to the Head and Neck



Allina Health

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**ABBOTT  
NORTHWESTERN  
HOSPITAL**

## **Important**

If you have questions about your recovery, please call **612-863-4060**.

If you have an emergency, call 911 or go to your nearest hospital Emergency Department right away.

## Radiation Therapy

You have just finished radiation therapy. 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.

## Skin Care

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

- Wash the affected skin gently. Use a mild soap and warm water. Pat dry gently. Do not rub.
- If you are using \_\_\_\_\_, continue applying it 3 times each day until the tube is empty.
- If you are using the thick cream you received from the Radiation Oncology Department (such as Aloe Vesta<sup>®</sup>, Aquaphor<sup>®</sup> or Proshield<sup>®</sup> Plus), continue to use it 2 times each day until you no longer have any open skin.
  - Then begin using \_\_\_\_\_ and apply it 3 times each day until the tube is empty.
- When you are done using \_\_\_\_\_, use an unscented moisturizer like Lubriderm<sup>®</sup>, Eucerin<sup>®</sup> Original Moisturizing Cream or cocoa butter for up to 6 months.
- Your skin in the treatment area will be sensitive to sunlight. Wear clothing to cover the area or use sunscreen with an SPF 30 or higher. Reapply sunscreen often.

## Fatigue

You can expect to feel tired for about 1 month after your last treatment. Your energy level will slowly improve.

- Rest is an important part of healing. Slowly return to your regular activity level.
- Save your energy by spacing out activities that make you tired.
- Rest as needed. Limit naps during the day if you are having trouble sleeping at night.
- Get regular activity and try to walk for 30 minutes each day. Start by walking for 5 to 10 minutes at one time. Slowly build to walking for 30 minutes at one time.

## Nutrition

If you had a poor appetite during treatment, this may last for a few weeks as the side effects of treatment slowly decrease. Good nutrition is very important during your recovery.

- Try to maintain your current weight or re-gain any weight you lost during treatment by eating plenty of protein and calories.
- You can add nutritional supplements as needed to help maintain your weight. Examples include Boost<sup>®</sup>, Ensure<sup>®</sup> or Carnation<sup>®</sup> Instant Breakfast<sup>®</sup>.
- Drink plenty of liquids. Try to have 48 to 64 ounces of liquids each day unless your doctor gives you other instructions.
- You may go back to taking vitamin supplements 2 weeks after your treatment.

## Nausea

If you had nausea (upset stomach) during treatment, this may last for a few weeks as the side effects of treatment slowly decrease.

- Eat foods that are easy on your stomach such as white toast, yogurt, broth or other bland foods.
- Do not force yourself to eat anything that makes you feel sick.
- Eat 5 to 6 meals each day instead of 3 large meals. Sit up after eating to help digestion.
- Sip only small amounts of liquid during meals. Many people feel full or bloated if they eat and drink at the same time.
- Avoid food and beverages that are too hot or too cold. Enjoy them at room temperature.
- Avoid strong smells.
- Use anti-nausea medicines regularly until your nausea gets better. Then take these medicines only as needed.

## Pain

You may or may not have pain or discomfort. If you do, please talk with your health care team. Pain left untreated can make you feel tired, sad, anxious, depressed or irritable.

- Keep a journal about your pain and the medicines that you take.
- Rate your pain on a scale of 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst pain you can imagine). This will help others better understand your pain.
- Take your pain medicine as directed. Do not change your dose without talking to your doctor.

- It is easier to manage pain when it is mild instead of severe. If your pain is happening most of the day, you will need to take your medicine on a regular schedule.
- Plan ahead and take your medicine before certain activities to help you stay active.
- Constipation is a common side effect to prescription pain medicines. You can take over-the-counter laxatives or stool softeners to have bowel movements at least every 2 to 3 days.
- If your medicine makes you feel sick, ask your doctor about switching medicines or taking something to help with the nausea.
- Your pain medicine may make you feel sleepy or dizzy. This often gets better after a few days. Do not drive or do other dangerous activities while you are taking prescription pain medicines.
- Do not crush or break your pain medicine unless your pharmacist says it is OK. Long-acting pain medicines are time-released and are dangerous if crushed.
- Most prescription pain medicine refills cannot be refilled over the phone. Please plan ahead so you do not run out of your medicines. You may need to pick up a written prescription and take it your pharmacy to have it filled.
- Do not stop taking your pain medicine suddenly. Instead, decrease the amount you take slowly as the pain decreases. Talk with your doctor about how to slowly decrease these medicines.

If you are having any problems controlling your pain, please call your doctor.

## Mouth Care

Radiation treatments will decrease your saliva and make your secretions thicker. Dry mouth can last many weeks or can be permanent.

- Look at your mouth and gums every day. Tell your health care provider if you notice any changes such as swelling, white coating, sores or bleeding.
- Brush your teeth and tongue, and floss every day. Use a soft-bristled toothbrush.
- Use a mouth wash or rinse that does not have alcohol such as Biotene® or Listerine® Zero.
- Use a salt and soda rinse to keep your mouth moist and to thin your secretions.
  - Mix ½ teaspoon baking soda and ½ teaspoon of salt in 20 ounces of water.
  - Take mouthful and swish it around for about 30 seconds or as you are able. Spit it out.
  - Repeat every 2 to 3 hours while you are awake.
- Keep your mouth moist by sipping on water or sucking on ice chips or sugar-free candies throughout the day.
- Avoid beverages that have caffeine (tea, coffee, soda) and alcohol because they can dry your mouth.
- Limit or stop smoking or using of other types of tobacco.
- Use a cool mist humidifier to add moisture to the air.
- Take any prescription medicines for dry mouth as directed.
- Continue your mouth and jaw exercises.
- See your dentist every 6 months for regular checkups. Use fluoride as directed by your dentist.
- See an ear, nose and throat doctor 1 to 2 months after your treatment. Schedule regular visits as directed by your health care provider.

## Ear Care

If any part of your ear canal was in the treatment area, you may have wax or fluid build-up in your ear. This can cause decreased hearing, ear drainage, ear pain or infection.

To help with decreased or muffled hearing, your doctor may recommend a decongestant and that you see an ear, nose and throat doctor. He or she can:

- irrigate your ear
- remove wax build-up
- insert a tube to drain fluid from your ear
- prescribe antibiotics for infection or pain medicines.

## Dentures

If you wear dentures, they not fit as well after treatment due to swelling. Talk with your dentist if this does not get better.

- Take your dentures out a do your mouth care and to look at your gums.
- Clean your dentures with an “antimicrobial cleanser,” such as Polident® or a store-brand cleanser.



## **Sexual Health**

Radiation treatments can affect your sexual health by causing changes in your body image, mood, energy level and sense of well-being. After treatment you may have one or more of the following:

- a change in your desire to have sex
- a change in the ability to have or maintain sexual arousal, an orgasm or an erection
- vaginal dryness (water-soluble lubricant may be helpful)
- pain during sex
- increased unpleasant sensation or numbness in the genitals.

You may have sex as long as it is comfortable. Please talk with a member of your health care team about any concerns you have about your sexual health.

## **Follow-up Care and Survivorship**

It is very important that you continue your follow-up care with your doctors. They will tell you how often you will need to have office visits, laboratory work, and imaging tests or scans.

### **Cancer Rehabilitation Program**

Your doctor can refer you to the Courage Kenny Rehabilitation Institute's Cancer Rehabilitation Program. This program offers consultations by health care providers who specialize in physical medicine and rehabilitation, and therapists who have advanced training in cancer rehabilitation. They provide care options to address the unique needs of people who have cancer such as pain and fatigue.

## **Lower your risk for cancer**

You can help lower your risk for getting cancer.

- Quit tobacco.
- Eat well-balanced meals. Eat a variety of foods from all the food groups. Try to eat at least 2 ½ cups of fruits and vegetables each day. Eat plenty of high-fiber foods such as whole grain breads and cereals.
- Get regular physical activity.
- Get to and stay at a healthy weight.
- Limit how much alcohol you drink. No more than 1 drink each day for women and no more than 2 drinks each day for men.
- Protect your skin.

Get emotional and social support to help learn how to cope with psychological stress. This can help reduce depression, anxiety and other symptoms related to treatment and having cancer.

## Resources

- Cancer.Net  
cancer.net
- National Cancer Institute  
cancer.gov
  - “Facing Forward: Life After Cancer Treatment”  
cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/  
facing-forward
- National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship  
canceradvocacy.gov
- American Cancer Society  
cancer.org
- Cancer Survivors Network  
acscsn.org
- LIVESTRONG  
livestrong.com.



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