

Radiation to the Chest

What you should know

This handout explains what to expect after having radiation treatments to the chest.

Side Effects

Radiation therapy to your chest can cause side effects to the area. These side effects vary from person to person. Most last only a short time and will go away after your radiation treatments are done.

The most common side effects after radiation therapy to the chest are:

- Skin reactions
- Dry or sore throat
- Cough
- Difficulty swallowing
- Heartburn
- Fatigue

Skin Reactions

You may have skin reactions while you are having radiation to your chest. Skin reactions occur because radiation must pass through your skin to reach the tumor. Special care of the skin in the treatment area helps prevent or lessen skin reactions. (Ask for our handout “Skin Care During Radiation Therapy.”)

Dry or Sore Throat

This side effect is most likely to occur after 2 or 3 weeks of treatment. To help a dry or sore throat:

- Drink plenty of fluids, at least 8 to 10 glasses (8 ounces each) every day.
- Try sucking on hard candies or mints or chewing gum to increase moisture in your mouth. Choose sugarless gums and candies.



Talk with your doctor if you have any questions about your radiation treatment or side effects.

- Rinse or gargle before and after eating, and as often as needed. Mix ½ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon baking soda in 2 cups of warm water. Do **not** use commercial mouthwashes. They will dry your throat.
- Do **not** smoke cigarettes, cigars, or a pipe. Do **not** chew tobacco.

Cough

Your nurse and doctor will talk with you about using cough medicine. If you have a lot of mucus, make sure you are drinking enough fluids. Fluids help keep mucus thin so that you can cough it up more easily.

Difficulty Swallowing

It is important to keep your *esophagus* (the tube that carries food to your stomach) working well during your treatment and recovery time. Drinking and eating normal amounts will help keep your esophagus healthy.

Because of this, we want to reduce any side effects that affect how you eat and swallow. These side effects include:

- Burning when you swallow.
- Feeling as if you are full or have a lump.

These side effects are more likely to occur after 2 or 3 weeks of treatment. To help ease these symptoms:

- Eat foods that are soft, smooth, and moist. They are easier to swallow.
- Eat foods at cool or room temperature. They are more comfortable to swallow.
- Add liquids such as gravies and sauces to make foods easier to swallow.
- Avoid dry or coarse foods such as crackers, nuts, potato chips, pretzels, and raw fruits and vegetables.
- Avoid spicy foods and acidic foods, such as oranges and tomatoes.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco. They will irritate your throat and esophagus.
- Eat smaller amounts of food more often. Some people find that eating 4 to 6 small meals is better than eating 3 large meals a day.

- Eat a healthy soft diet. Include foods from all the food groups. Try not to lose weight during radiation therapy.
- There are medicines that can help you swallow. Ask your nurse or doctor about these.

Heartburn

You may have heartburn or acid reflux after 2 or 3 weeks of radiation treatment. If you have these symptoms, it is OK to take an over-the-counter (non-prescription) medicine that reduces acid.

If you are also having chemotherapy treatment, some heartburn medicines may not work. Ask your nurse or doctor about what medicines will work best for you.

Fatigue

During radiation therapy, your body uses a lot of energy. Other things that add to fatigue are stress related to your illness, daily trips for treatment, and the effects of radiation on normal cells. To reduce fatigue, eat well, stay active, and do your best to manage your stress.

The amount of fatigue varies with each person and will likely go away over time after your radiation treatment is finished. We suggest that you pace your activities and plan to rest often so that you do not get too tired.

Ask someone to help you clean the house, shop, and cook meals. If someone offers to help, accept their help. If you live alone and are too tired to cook, try frozen dinners. Choose options that provide good nutrition without too many calories, fat, or salt. Or, you might want to use a community service such as Meals on Wheels.

Other Side Effects

It is possible that other less common side effects may also occur. Tell your doctor, nurse, or therapist if you have any other symptoms.

Questions?

Your questions are important. If you have questions or concerns, the best way to contact your doctor is to send them a message through MyChart. Please include a photo if relevant.

You may also call UWMC Radiation Oncology:

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., call UWMC Cancer Center at 206.598.4100. Press 1 after the call goes through.

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.598.6190 and ask for the Radiation Oncology resident on call to be paged.