

Radiation to the Pelvis

What you should know

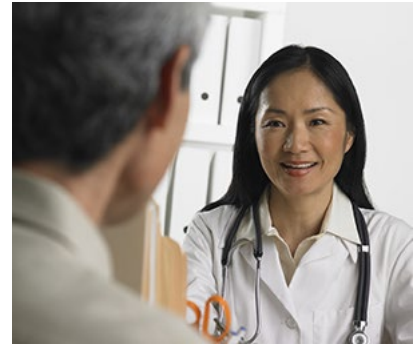
This handout explains the side effects after having radiation therapy to your pelvis.

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

Side Effects

The most common side effects after radiation treatment to the pelvis are:

- Skin reactions
- *Diarrhea* (loose or runny stool)
- *Dysuria* (painful urination)
- *Proctitis* (painful rectum)
- *Fatigue* (feeling very tired)
- Bone marrow *suppression* (decreased blood counts)



Talk with your care provider if you have any questions or concerns about side effects after radiation therapy.

Skin Reactions

Skin reactions occur after radiation therapy because X-rays must pass through your skin to reach the tumor. Take special care of the skin in the treatment area to help prevent or lessen skin reactions. (Ask for our handout “Skin Care During Radiation Therapy.”)

Follow these tips to lessen skin reactions:

- **Minimize moisture.** Use mild soap without perfumes or deodorants, such as Neutrogena or Dove for Sensitive Skin. Avoid using lotions or perfumes on the treatment area.
- **Minimize chafing.** Wear clothes that are loose and soft. Avoid wearing tight waistbands, other tight clothing, or materials that irritate your skin on your lower body.
- **Avoid shaving.** Radiation will suppress hair growth in the treatment area.

Diarrhea (Loose Stool)

Radiation to your pelvic area can irritate the lining of your intestines. This causes food to pass through your intestines without being fully digested and absorbed. This can cause cramps and diarrhea. These side effects usually occur around the 3rd or 4th week of treatment.

If you have diarrhea, try these tips:

Avoid:

- Foods that are high in fiber such as beans, broccoli, corn, onions, garlic, popcorn, nuts, whole grains, and raw fruits and vegetables
- Foods that cause gas and cramps such as carbonated drinks, chewing gum, beans, cabbage, nuts, and sweets
- Coffee
- High-fat foods, especially fried and greasy foods
- Milk or milk products *if* they irritate your bowels

Try:

- Small meals and snacks instead of large meals
- Plenty of fluid to stay hydrated such as Kool-Aid, popsicles, Jell-O, water, juice (not orange or grapefruit), or Gatorade
- Only fruits and vegetables that are peeled and cooked
- Foods that are warm or at room temperature (very hot or very cold foods move through your intestines more quickly)
- Potassium-rich foods such as bananas, peach, or apricot nectar; potatoes, fish, and meat (your body loses potassium when you have diarrhea)

Tell your nurse if you have diarrhea. You may need an anti-diarrhea medicine.

Problems Urinating

Sometimes, radiation to the pelvic area causes frequency, urgency, or pain when urinating (*dysuria*).

- Tell your nurse or doctor if you have these symptoms. We will test a urine sample for infection. Your doctor may prescribe *antispasmodics* or other medicines.
- Increase your fluid intake. Drink plenty of water, Gatorade, light fruit juices, or Kool-Aid.

Sore Rectum

If your rectal area is in the treatment area, you may get *proctitis*. This is when the lining of your rectum is inflamed. It may feel irritated or painful.

If you get proctitis:

- Keep the area clean and dry.
- Ask your doctor or nurse if *sitz* baths (soaking in warm water) or medicines might help.

Bone Marrow Suppression

Bone marrow is a spongy tissue inside many bones in the body. These bones include the hip and leg bones, ribs, collarbones (*clavicles*), and breastbone (*sternum*),

Bone marrow plays important roles in the body. It helps produce:

- Red blood cells, which carry oxygen
- White blood cells, which fight infection
- Platelets, which help the blood clot

Bone marrow is very sensitive to radiation. If bones that contain marrow are in your treatment area, your blood counts may be affected. You will have blood draws during your radiation treatment to check your blood counts.

Fatigue

During radiation therapy, the body uses a lot of energy. This means you can feel fatigue. Other things that add to fatigue are stress related to your illness, daily trips for treatment, and the effects of radiation on normal cells.

The amount of fatigue varies with each person. It will likely go away over time when your radiation treatment is done. 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, or cook meals. If someone offers to help, accept their help. If you live alone and are too tired to cook, try some of the well-balanced frozen dinners. Also consider using a community service such as Meals on Wheels.

Other Side Effects

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

How Nutrition Can Help

Eating a healthy diet will help your body heal. It may also help ease side effects from radiation treatment.

We encourage you to get enough protein and calories to maintain your weight. We can refer you to a dietitian who can help you choose nutritious foods.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Radiation Oncology: Call 206.598.4100, weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.598.6190 and ask for the Radiation Oncologist on call.