

What to Expect When Getting Radiation Therapy to the Spinal Cord Area

For patients and families

Read this pamphlet to learn about:

- The main steps in planning radiation treatment
- How to manage common side effects
- What happens when you finish treatment
- Where to get more information

Radiation therapy is the use of a high energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. For more information on Radiation Therapy, please watch our patient education videos at www.whattoexpectrt.theprincessmargaret.ca.

These videos:

- Give a step-by-step guide to the radiation therapy treatment process.
- Explain how radiation works in the body.
- Shows how your health care team works to give high quality treatment.



Your radiation therapy team consists of:

- your radiation oncologist (cancer doctor)
- radiation oncology nurses
- radiation therapists
- other health care team members

They will provide you and your family with care, support and information.

If you have any questions, talk to your radiation therapists at your daily treatment appointment. You can also talk to your radiation oncologist or nurse at your weekly review appointment.



Interpretation is available if you speak very little or no English. Please let us know as soon as possible that you need help with interpretation.

Your Radiation Therapy Planning

To plan for your radiation therapy treatment, you will need a CT simulation scan appointment. The CT simulation scan gives your radiation oncologist and radiation therapist the detailed x-ray images that are used to develop your treatment plan.

Please check in at the reception desk on level 1B at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre. We will take your photograph to help us identify you during your treatment.

You can expect to be here for at least 2 hours for this appointment.

What happens during my CT simulation appointment?

For patients having radiation treatment to the upper spine, you will have a customized treatment mask made at this appointment. The mask moulds around your head and neck area. It will be used to keep you in the same position each day. You will wear the mask during your CT simulation scan and during your treatment appointments.

For patients having radiation treatment to the middle or lower part of the spine, a body mould may be made for you. The body mould is shaped around your whole body, and a clear plastic sheet will be placed over you. Marks will be drawn on your body to mark your position for treatment. To make sure we can see your marks, we will put small permanent tattoos, the size of a freckle, to mark the spot so that they cannot be rubbed or washed off. You will wear the body mould during your CT simulation scan and during your treatment appointments.

Your radiation oncologist, radiation physicist and radiation therapist will use the information from the simulation scans to develop a plan that is specific to you.

A few days after your CT simulation appointment, the booking staff will call you at home and let you know the date and time of your first radiation therapy appointment. You can also check for your appointment on myUHN patient portal.

Your Radiation Therapy

Where do I go for my radiation therapy?

You will have your radiation therapy on level 2B (2 levels below the main floor) of the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre.

Check in at the reception desk on level 2B when you arrive. The staff there can show you how to check in.

How long is the course of treatment?

You should plan to be at the hospital for 1 hour each day you have your treatment. Most of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position for treatment.

Your first treatment may take longer because your radiation therapists will be checking all the information from your plan before giving you your treatment.

How to Manage Common Side Effects from Radiation Therapy

Side effects from radiation are different for everyone. Most side effects are temporary and will settle down about 2 to 4 weeks after your last treatment.

Here are some common side effects after radiation to the brain and spinal cord and how to manage them.

Will my pain get worse?

- To prepare for your CT simulation appointment and your treatment appointments, please take your pain medication as prescribed by your doctor.
- You will see your doctor to talk about pain medications before your first radiation treatment. Some medications may be prescribed for you to take before radiation treatment each day to avoid side effects.
- Within 24 to 48 hours after your first treatment, you may have “flare up” pain (an increase in pain). Bring any fast-acting medication with you to all of your appointments. Please let the Radiation team know if you need to talk about pain medication.

Will my skin get sore?

The most common change is that your skin becomes red in the area getting radiation during the first 3 weeks of treatment. Your skin may look slightly red or tanned/darker and may feel warm, dry or itchy.

What can I do?

- Shower or bathe with warm water and gently pat dry.
- Use a mild soap such as Dove or Ivory.
- Avoid rubbing or scratching the area.
- Use a water-based moisturizing cream such as Lubriderm or Glaxal-based cream.
- Do not expose the area to direct sunlight.

You may have other skin changes, such as

- Flaking and/or peeling of the skin.

What can I do?

- Continue to use the moisturizing cream on the dry areas.
- Let your radiation therapists know

Will radiation to my spine affect my blood count?

Your spine has bone marrow, which makes red and white blood cells and platelets. If radiation is given to a large part of the spine, it can lower your blood count.

You may have a lower white blood count and platelet count during the course of treatment. You may also have a lower red blood count 1 month after treatment.

Your doctor may order some routine blood tests to check your blood count during your treatment and after your treatment course is finished.

Will I get nausea, vomiting or diarrhea from having radiation to my spine?

- You can expect nausea and vomiting because of irritation to the throat, stomach and bowels.
- For the top of the spine area, you may have trouble swallowing, and may feel something like heartburn.
- For the lower spine area, radiation can cause upset stomach, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.
- Your oncologist will prescribe medications to help you manage these symptoms.

What can I do to cope with nausea and vomiting?

- Take your anti-nausea medication as prescribed by your doctor.
- Eat small, frequent meals throughout the day. Nausea may be worse on an empty stomach.
- Use dry, starchy foods such as crackers, melba toast and plain cookies to help settle your stomach.
- Choose cold foods or foods served at room temperature if food smells bother you.
- Sip fluids such as water, diluted fruit juices and flat ginger ale throughout the day. This is very important if you have vomiting.
- If you have diabetes, ask your radiation therapists if you need an appointment with a dietitian for nutrition counselling.

For more information, ask your Radiation Therapist for the “How to Manage Your Nausea and Vomiting” pamphlet.

What about exercise and other activities?

You may have to stop doing some activities because of fatigue or other symptoms. Ask your doctor about driving a vehicle or operating machinery during this time.

What can I do to improve my appetite?

Some patients lose interest in food while having radiation therapy. Chemotherapy and pain medications can also lead to a loss of appetite.

- Eat small, frequent meals throughout the day instead of 3 large meals.
- Have your biggest meal when you feel most hungry.
- Stock up on foods that are easy to prepare.
- Do light exercise and get some fresh air.
- Ask about an appointment with a dietitian if needed.

We have other pamphlets to help you with your appetite. Please ask your health care team.

What can I do to cope with diarrhea?

- Ask your doctor medication that can control diarrhea, such as Imodium.
- Eat foods low in fibre. Avoid foods such as whole grain breads and cereals, dried peas and beans, nuts and seeds.
- Avoid high fat foods, caffeine and spices as they may make diarrhea worse.
- Switch to lactose reduced dairy products if you develop a temporary intolerance to lactose (the natural sugar in milk).
- Sip fluids such as water, diluted fruit juices and caffeine-free soft drinks throughout the day. This is very important to stay hydrated.
- Ask your radiation therapists about an appointment with a dietitian.

For more information, ask your radiation therapists or nurse for the “Eating Hints For People with Diarrhea” pamphlet.

Other side effects after radiation treatment to the spine

Will I get tired while on treatment?

Fatigue is a common side effect of radiation therapy. It usually starts a few weeks into the treatment. Fatigue is different from person to person, but usually you will have more fatigue at the end of treatment.

It should get better over 1 to 2 months after treatment. Do your normal activities if you feel well enough.

What can I do to cope with fatigue?

- Rest as you need to, especially with activities that are tiring.
- Drink plenty of fluids throughout the day.
- Eat enough calories and protein so that you are not losing weight. This can make the fatigue worse.
- Ask for help with your everyday activities.
- Exercise can help. Exercise can be as simple as a 10 to 15 minute walk 3 times a week, if you can manage it.
- Do something you enjoy each day such as a hobby or walking outside.



Talk to your doctor if you have any of these symptoms:

- Severe nausea or vomiting
- Fainting or dizziness
- Weakness, numbness or pins and needles in your arms, legs, hands or feet
- More pain than usual, or a new pain
- Any sudden changes in your bladder or bowel habits (for example, you cannot urinate)

You will meet with your radiation oncologist weekly and can ask any questions and discuss these side effects.

What to Expect When You Finish Radiation Therapy

Symptoms will begin to disappear about 2 to 4 weeks after your last radiation treatment. The skin reaction will slowly disappear and you can go back to your normal skin care routine.

Continue to protect the skin in the treated area from the sun by using a hat or sunscreen.

We will give you a follow up appointment to see your radiation oncologist usually 4 to 6 weeks after your treatment has finished.

Important phone numbers:

Radiation Oncologist: _____

Oncology Nurse: _____

CNS Triage line: 416 946 4501 extension 5418

Where do I get more information?

Please visit the **Princess Margaret Cancer Centre Patient & Family Library** on the main floor for information about treatment and services at the Cancer Centre.

Phone: 416 946 4501 extension 5383

Email: patienteducation@uhn.ca

Website: www.uhn.ca/princessmargaret

For more resources about nutrition during cancer treatment pick up a copy at the Patient Library of the book called "Goes Down Easy: Recipes to help you cope with the challenge of eating during cancer treatment".

