

Information sheet

Medical Services - Radiation therapy

Radiation therapy to the head and neck

Information for patients, carers and their families

What is radiation therapy?

Radiation is a precise and localised treatment. Any related side effects will only occur within the area being treated. Each person is very much an individual so not everyone will experience the same side effects even if you are receiving similar treatments.

You will receive regular treatment reviews from your Radiation Oncologist and weekly reviews by your Nurse. If you are concerned about any aspect of your treatment, and or new problems arise between these review times please notify your Radiation Therapists and they will assist you.

Possible side effects

- Your mouth may become dry.
- A sore mouth and throat may develop.
- Loss of taste may occur, especially if you are also having chemotherapy.
- Mouth ulcers may occur. (*Good oral hygiene and a well-balanced diet are essential in the prevention of mouth ulcers.*)
- Voice loss may occur in some patients as a form of laryngitis. (*This will resolve after the completion of treatment.*)
- Your skin around the treatment area will become red, dry and itchy. Towards the middle of treatment, your skin may begin to peel or break down.

General advice to follow during your radiation treatment

- Shower daily, using a warm gentle flow.
- Use a gentle shampoo.
- Apply a small amount of aqueous cream (e.g. Sorbolene® or MooGoo® Skin Milk Udder Cream) three times per day to the entire treatment area. Avoid applying just before treatment.
- Your nurse or Radiation Oncologist may recommend other creams to use.
- Only shave with an electric shaver.
- Areas of your skin that react during treatment will always be more sensitive and at risk of sun damage even when your treatment has finished. You will always need to protect them from the sun:
 - Wear a hat
 - Wear loose fitting, cotton clothing
 - Use sunscreen with a high protection factor (but do not use this on the treatment site during treatment)
 - Try to stay in the shade.
- Alcohol may irritate the lining of the mouth and throat and is best avoided. If you choose to have an alcoholic drink, have limited amounts and discuss this with your Radiation Oncologist.

This patient publication was developed with input from healthcare consumers. The Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service is accredited by the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards. For more information see www.safetyandquality.gov.au or ask a member of staff.



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Oral hygiene is extremely important during your treatment

- It is recommended to visit a dentist prior to the commencement of your treatment, to ensure that your mouth is healthy and free from infection.
- Brush your teeth and tongue gently after each meal and at bedtime with a soft, small head toothbrush using mild fluoride toothpaste.
- Rinse your mouth and dentures after you eat.
- Mouthwash Recipes:
 - ¼ tsp bicarbonate soda in 1 Cup of warm water
 - ¼ tsp salt in 1 Cup of warm water
 - Alcohol-free mouthwash such as Biotene.

Treatment for a sore throat or mouth

- Dissolve two soluble Panadol® tablets in a glass of water: gargle and then swallow. This can be used every four hours for pain relief if necessary and is best used half an hour prior to eating.
- Xylocaine® viscous spray is a local anaesthetic spray that will be provided by the nurse as required. This is sprayed on the affected area 10 minutes prior to a meal to alleviate any pain whilst eating.

Diet

- You will see a dietician who can offer you advice on nutrition and help you with your individual needs. These are some tips to maintaining good nutrition:
 - Eat frequent small meals rather than three (3) large meals
 - Drink eight (8) cups of water a day

- Drink frequently while eating as this will make chewing and swallowing easier
- Food served at room temperature is better tolerated
- Use bland, non-spicy sauces and gravies as accompaniments.

Smoking

You are strongly advised not to smoke. Smoking during and after treatment will reduce the chance of treatment being successful.

It will also make the reaction to radiotherapy worse and significantly increase the risk of late side effects.

Please ask for advice from any member of the team if you would like help to quit.

Further information

For further up to date evidence-based information, please refer to www.eviq.org.au

Nursing staff can be contacted 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday by phoning 5202 1111.