

What to Expect While Receiving Radiation Therapy for Head and Neck Cancer



Princess Margaret

Information for patients who are having radiation therapy

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

For more information on Radiation Therapy, please watch our patient education videos at www.whattoexpectrt.theprincessmargaret.ca. These videos offer a step-by-step guide to the radiation therapy treatment process. They also explain how radiation works in the body and how your team works together to deliver the highest quality treatments.

Please visit the UHN Patient Education website for more health information: www.uhnpatienteducation.ca
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Your Radiation Oncologist, Nurse, Radiation Therapists and other health care professionals will provide you and your family with care, support and information throughout your treatment.

Please ask any questions you have when you come each day. Your Radiation Therapists can try to answer your questions or let you know which members of your health care team can help. You may also talk to your Doctor 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.

Planning your Radiation Therapy

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

You can expect to be here for about 1 hour for this appointment.

What happens during my CT simulation appointment

We will use a CT simulator to decide on the area of treatment. A CT simulator is a CT scanner with special computer software that gives us the detailed x-ray images we need to prepare your treatment.

A device that moulds around your head and neck area will be made at this appointment. This is called a mask. It will be used during your treatment to help get you in the same position each time. The Radiation Therapist will explain this and any other procedure to you at the appointment.

The Radiation Therapists may draw marks on your skin. These marks can wash off, so they will also give you a few small permanent tattoos using a fine needle. The Radiation Therapist will explain this procedure to you first.

The Doctors, Physicists and Therapists will use the information they gather to develop a plan that is right for you.

Having your Radiation Therapy Treatment

When will I know about my first treatment appointment?

You can expect a phone call at home a few days after your CT simulation appointment. We will give you the date and time of your first appointment.

Where do I go for my radiation treatment appointments?

Your radiation treatment will be at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre. Check in at the reception desk on level 2B when you arrive. Level 2B is 2 levels below the main floor.

The staff there will show you how to check in.

Can I schedule my radiation treatment appointments at times that are convenient for me?

Because we treat so many patients every day we cannot guarantee your exact appointment time. Your Radiation Therapists will try to help you if there are special circumstances.

What happens at the treatment appointment?

The Radiation Therapists will check the measurements from your CT simulation scan. They will take a Cone Beam CT scan (sometimes called a “mini CT”) to check that you are in the same position every day. Once your position has been checked and any changes have been made, you will have your radiation treatment.

How long is the treatment?

You should plan to be at the hospital for 30 to 60 minutes each day. Your treatments will take about 20 minutes. Most of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position for treatment.

Will I see the Oncologist during my radiation treatments?

You will meet with your Radiation Oncologist and Nurse once every week during your treatment. He or she will answer any questions or talk to you about any concerns that you may have. Tell them about any side effects you may be having.

Some common side effects to expect from radiation treatment

Skin changes You may have changes to your skin in the treatment area. This is a normal side effect and will get better.

Your skin will feel **irritated** after 2 to 3 weeks of treatment. Some areas may become **dry, flaky** patches in later weeks. By the end of treatment you may have some **moist, open** areas.

The skin in the area being treated will begin to heal about 2 to 3 weeks after finishing your radiation treatments and should heal within 1 to 2 months.

To learn how to care for your skin please see the pamphlet "Taking care of your skin during radiation therapy."

**Changes to
nose lining
and skin
on lips and
sinuses**

The lining inside your nose and the skin on your lips are very thin and sensitive. If your treatment includes these areas, you may need to care for them a bit differently than other areas of skin.

The tips below are only if your lips, nose or sinuses are being treated directly with radiation.

Do these things if your lips, nose or sinuses are irritated:

- Use a sterile water-based lubricating gel such as E-Z Lubricating Jelly or Surgilube. You can buy them at a drug store. Don't use a moisturizing cream.
- Use a clean cotton swab to gently apply the gel.
- Try saline soaks to help soothe and clean these areas but it may be harder to apply than to other areas of the body.
- Use a clean squirt bottle to gently put saline inside the nose. Do this over a sink with your head tilted forward to let the saline run into the sink.
- Try products such as "Nasa Mist" or a Neti Pot if you find a squirt bottle too hard to use. Your treatment team can help you find what works best for you.
- **Do not try to force saline past any blockages you may have.**

Hair loss Hair loss from radiation only happens in areas affected by the radiation (for example some facial hair, some scalp in the lower part of the back of the neck). In most cases this hair will grow again within 6 months of finishing treatment, but in some cases the hair may stay thin or not grow again.

If your scalp is irritated, try washing with a gentle, unscented shampoo (such as baby shampoo). Follow the “Taking care of your skin during radiation therapy.” pamphlet advice for these areas, including advice about shaving.

Dry mouth If your saliva glands are in the treatment area, radiation can cause you to have less saliva and thicker saliva. These changes usually begin during the first and second week of treatment and continue throughout treatment. Your mouth may become dry and sticky, making it harder to swallow.

How much and how long this lasts will depend on your radiation treatment plan.

In some cases your saliva slowly improves after treatment but some dryness may be permanent.

Changes in your taste buds If your tongue or saliva glands are in the treatment area, your sense of taste may change. You may find that food tastes different or you may have a loss of taste.

These changes can begin in the first and second week of treatment and continue throughout treatment. Changes in taste usually improve 6 to 12 months after radiation treatment is done but some changes may be permanent.

**Sore throat
and trouble
swallowing**

Your mouth and throat may become dry, irritated or swollen during treatment.

This may include areas on your:

- tongue
- floor or roof of your mouth
- inside of your cheeks
- areas around your gums
- your lips

The exact area depends on your radiation treatment plan.

These changes usually begin in the first or second week of treatment and continue throughout treatment. How much and how long they last depends on your radiation treatment plan.

Healing inside your mouth may take a few months after your last radiation treatment. Your care team can help explain what to expect.

**Hoarseness
or losing
your voice**

Dryness and swelling in your throat and voice box may affect your voice if it's in the treatment area. These changes can begin in the first or second week of treatment and continue throughout treatment. These are normal changes that don't last and usually improve 1 to 3 months after treatment.

If your voice box is being treated with radiation, you may temporarily lose your voice because of swelling.

What do I do if I have trouble eating and drinking?

Dryness, swelling and pain in your throat and voice box can make it hard to drink and eat. Many patients use:

- pain medicines
- gargles
- changes to what they eat and drink

These temporarily help with eating and drinking during this difficult time.

In some cases a feeding tube may be needed. Your Radiation Oncologist and Nurse will talk to you about this and what is available to help you.

Here are some general care tips to start.

Do these things if you have changes in your mouth:

- Keep caring for your mouth with baking soda mouthwash, gentle cleaning, and any instructions from your Dentist. Do not use regular mouthwash. It may irritate your mouth and throat.
- Sip water or use a spray bottle to keep your mouth and throat moist.
- Use pain medicine you get from your doctor that make it easier to eat. For example, Mucositis Mouthwash is often used 15 to 20 minutes before you eat or drink to numb the area and help you swallow.

Do these things if you have changes to your voice:

- Use baking soda mouthwash regularly. See the recipe below.
- Rest your voice as much as possible.
- Keep the air moist in your home by using a cool mist humidifier (especially at night by your bed) or leaving a bowl of water in your bedroom.

Baking Soda mouthwash recipe

1 level teaspoon baking soda

10 to 16 ounces of tap water (2 large glasses, or 500 mL)

- Mix together and store in a clean jar.
- Make a fresh batch every day.
- Rinse and gargle (but do not swallow) with this mouthwash to soothe your mouth and clear out thick saliva.
- Use as often as possible (every hour if you can), especially before and after meals.

OR:

- Use flat club soda to rinse and gargle. You can also swallow a small amount to clear the back of your throat.

Do these things to eat well during treatment:

- Use the Swallowing Exercise instructions (see pamphlet or video).
- Continue to eat what you normally do until eating is difficult. Switch to softer foods as needed.
- For taste changes, try different foods. Some may taste better than others.
- Try smaller meals several times a day instead of a few larger meals.
- Stock up on foods that are easy to prepare and easy to swallow.
- Carry a snack with you when you come for treatment, in case you are delayed and feel hungry.
- Light exercise and fresh air may help your appetite.
- If you find eating hot or cold food irritating to your mouth or throat, try them at room temperature.
- Use gravy, sauces and cream soups to moisten food.
- Take pain medicines and use oral rinses as prescribed to help you eat more comfortably.
- Use meal supplements (such as Ensure) if you aren't able to swallow enough solid food.
- If you have a feeding tube, use it to keep up your nutritional intake as instructed by your Doctor and Dietitian.
- Ask a member of your health care team for a referral to a Dietitian if you need more suggestions.

Do these things to reduce irritation of your mouth and throat:

Avoid alcohol and smoking.

Be careful with foods that may be irritating such as:

- highly spiced (hot) foods
- highly acidic foods (such as oranges, tomatoes)
- rough texture foods (such as chips, nuts, raw vegetables, toast)

Do these things to drink well during treatment:

- Drinking enough fluids to help you feel better during treatment may be difficult. Feeling light-headed, tired, or having dark urine may be signs that you need more fluid.
- Fluids for example may include water, juices, milk, soups, ice cream, popsicles, tea, fluid supplements (such as Ensure).
- Use the Swallowing Exercise instructions (see pamphlet or video).
- Carry a bottle of fluid with you all the time and take small sips often.
- If you have a feeding tube, use it to keep up your fluid intake.
- If you become dehydrated your Doctor may prescribe intravenous (IV) fluid to help you.

Will I get tired while on treatment?

Fatigue (feeling very tired) is a common side effect of radiation therapy. This varies with each person but often begins early in treatment. It can increase gradually during treatment, and usually gets better over 1 to 2 months after treatment is over. Continue doing your usual activities if you feel well enough to do so.

Do these things if you are feeling tired:

- Pace yourself, especially with activities that make you feel tired.
- Ask for help with activities you do every day and that you cannot manage.
- Pick a relaxing activity (for example walking) or hobby that you are able to do every day.
- Keep a regular sleep routine at night and rest as you need to during the day.
- Keep up your food and liquid intake as described earlier.

Will I get constipated?

Changes in what you eat and the side effects of some pain medicine can make you constipated. If you are taking opioid pain medicine (such as codeine and Morphine), you may need to take another medicine at the same time to prevent constipation. This is called a ‘bowel routine’. It includes a stool softener (such as Colace) and a laxative (such as Senokot).

Your Nurse Case Manager will help you manage your pain medicine and bowel routine medicines.

What happens when I finish treatment?

Near the end of your treatment, we will give you a booklet titled “What to Do When Finishing Radiation Therapy.”

At your final weekly review appointment you will be given a follow-up appointment to see the Doctor a few weeks or months after your treatment is finished.

After treatment finishes, some of your side effects will carry on and may get worse before they start to get better. This is normal. Continue to follow your health care team’s instructions until you feel better.

Call the hospital once you are finished with your treatment, if you have any questions or concerns.

Need more information?

Please visit the Patient and Family Library on the main floor, or call them at: 416-946-4501 extension 5383.

You can also visit the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre web site at www.theprincessmargaret.ca for more information and resources about your treatment and also services at the cancer centre.

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