



You will be receiving radiation therapy treatments to the head and neck area. Some of the possible side effects that you may experience during treatment can include the following: skin irritation, fatigue, a sore throat, hoarseness, mouth changes, decrease in saliva, and changes in taste and hair loss. Measures that you can take to minimize these side effects are listed below.

Head and Neck Radiation Therapy

INSTRUCTIONS FOR PATIENTS RECEIVING RADIATION THERAPY TO THE HEAD AND NECK



Skin Care: It is okay to bathe or shower daily with a mild soap. Wash the treatment area gently. Do not scrub the skin. If you have ink marks on your skin, please do not wash them off. Gently pat the skin dry.

During the course of your radiation therapy treatments, we ask that you put nothing on the skin in the treatment area except for the products recommended by the physician or nurse. Use moisturizers for dryness and over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream for itchiness. Apply products twice daily or as needed. We do not want the skin “greasy” when you come in for treatment.

Avoid the use of hot or cold in the treatment area. This includes the use of heating pads, hot packs, hot water bottles, ice packs, and ice bags. It is okay to use an electric blanket. Avoid the use of tape or Band-Aids in the treatment area.



Sun Exposure: During treatment, avoid exposing the skin in the treatment area to direct sunlight or tanning beds. If you plan on being in the sun for an extended period, cover the skin with clothing or broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher. The treatment area will *always* be more sensitive to the sun and tanning beds.



Fatigue: Loss of energy is a common side effect of radiation therapy. Endurance, stamina, concentration, and motivation may all decrease as a result of fatigue. Conserve your energy and rest when you need to. Eat a well-balanced diet and stay well-hydrated by drinking plenty of water. Exercise such as walking or yoga can improve your energy. Respect your body’s limitations – if you hurt while exercising, stop.



Esophagitis: Toward the end of therapy, you may notice some irritation of the esophagus (esophagitis). You may notice a sore throat, a lump in the throat, difficulty swallowing or a burning sensation (like heartburn). Please let your doctor or nurse know if you experience any of these symptoms. They can recommend the use of certain products to relieve these feelings.



It is best to avoid these situations:

- It is very important that you avoid alcohol (beer, wine, mixed drinks) and products that contain alcohol (cough syrups, Nyquil).
- Do not use any tobacco (cigarettes, cigars, pipe or chewing tobacco) during the course of treatment. Breathing air that has tobacco smoke or pollutants will irritate your lungs and throat.
- Carbonated beverages, spicy foods, crunchy foods, extremely hot or extremely cold foods, and acidic foods (tomato sauce, citrus fruits, coffee) should be avoided as well.



Hoarseness: You may notice voice changes during the treatments. Hoarseness may increase toward the end of treatment. As the throat becomes irritated, reduce the amount of speaking and talk softly. These symptoms should improve 4-6 weeks after treatments are completed.



Mouth Changes: About 1-2 weeks after treatments have begun, you may develop dry mouth, mucositis (irritation and tenderness of the lining of the mouth), change in taste or loss of taste, and thickened saliva. Keeping the mouth clean by using baking soda and salt water rinses every two hours and after eating, will help to prevent problems. Sucking on sugar free candy and carrying a water bottle to sip throughout the day can help. Avoid mouthwashes that you get at the store, as they contain alcohol which will irritate your mouth. If you have a metallic taste, use plastic utensils when eating. If you notice white patches in your mouth, please tell your doctor or nurse. Swallowing exercises and jaw exercises (as prescribed by a speech pathologist) should be performed daily to prevent impaired swallowing after radiation is completed.



Dental Care: You will need to see a dentist prior to beginning radiation treatment to the head & neck. If you need dental work such as extractions, the dentist will help refer you to an oral surgeon. Dental work must be completed prior to starting radiation treatments. The dentist will make recommendations such as fluoride treatments to do during radiation treatments. You will need to see a dentist regularly (at least every 4-6 months) after radiation treatments are complete. If you ever need dental work or an extraction after you have completed radiation, you should remind the dentist that you have had radiation treatment to the head & neck area and contact us.



Hair Loss: About the third week of treatment hair loss will begin in the treatment area. Do not color your hair during treatment, but it is ok to wash hair with gentle shampoo. Do not cut your hair until you know what hair is falling out. Hair can take 4-6 months to grow back, and it may be thinner when it does return. Some hair loss may be permanent.



Nutrition: It is important to eat well during radiation to aid the body in recovery and restore strength. We suggest a diet high in protein and calories, and the use of nutritional supplements such as Boost, Ensure, or a similar generic product. Even if you are overweight, we recommend maintaining your weight and preventing weight loss during treatment. You may need to eat small meals or snacks every 2-3 hours rather than eating three large meals. It is not unusual to have a decreased appetite during treatment, but you will need to focus on getting enough food daily. Meeting with a dietician is helpful. If you need a referral, let your nurse know.



Duration: Side effects may worsen the final week of treatment and the week after radiation treatments are completed. Most of these side effects gradually subside within 4-8 weeks after treatment. Please call our office if you have any questions at any time during or after your radiation treatments.
