

Everything I Wish I Had Known... about Radiation

If you will be receiving radiation as part of your cancer treatment, here are some helpful tips

1. Radiation treatment is given during short sessions over a course of days or weeks. The number and length of each session are determined by the radiation oncologist. A series of “boost” treatments may be given the last few days. Treatment begins with one or more appointments for positioning studies to ensure exact positioning during treatments. A molded “nest” will be made to conform to your body so you can maintain the precise position during your treatments. Sessions are typically scheduled for five consecutive days per week, with weekends off.

2. Treatment Sessions typically involve lying still on a table in a position supported by the molded nest created just for you. If you are chilled, ask if you can have a blanket during set-up. Technicians will help position you under the radiation equipment, before leaving you alone in the room. They will speak to you over the audio system to give you specific instructions during the treatments. They may ask you to hold your breath at specific times during the sessions. Some women use visualization, meditation or prayer to help them relax if they become anxious. During treatments you will not feel any physical sensations/pain.

2. Fatigue is very common. Resting, naps and gentle exercise, such as walking, are tried and true ways to recharge and cope with fatigue. Eating ample protein, fruits and vegetables, as well as staying well-hydrated, will help repair your body. Fatigue usually continues for weeks or sometimes months after radiation treatments end. Some women consult an Oncology Naturopath about supportive supplements and nutrition. Physical therapy is often helpful, so ask your doctor for a referral to Oncology Rehabilitation.

3. Skin care is important. After several weeks, the radiation starts to build up and the skin may become reddened and irritated. This is why skin treatment is essential. Be sure the team is aware of your skin reaction so they can recommend soothing products. The radiation team will tell you which products you can and cannot use before and after radiation sessions. Before each radiation session, you will wash your skin with mild cleansers, but do not scrub. Remember to not use products like makeup, moisturizers, deodorants in the treatment area. Moisturizing after sessions is a priority. Only use the products your team recommends or approves for the treatment area. Aquaphor, CeraVe and Cetaphil are often recommended. If a friend tells you about a product, ask the team about it before using. Always protect your skin from sun exposure with clothing and sun screen. Radiation enters and leaves the body, and may affect skin in both areas. Ask the doctor about specific locations so you can moisturize all areas.

4. Clothing may be irritating to your irradiated skin. Wear loose clothing whenever possible. Some medical teams recommend allowing periods of time with no clothing on the radiation site. Some women find that wearing a soft cotton tank top under their bra helps protect the skin. The radiation technicians may mark on you with Sharpie markers, which can cause staining on under garments. Also, some of the moisturizers are greasy and discoloring. Consider wearing tank tops/garments that can be discarded after treatment.

5. Lymphedema risk is increased by radiation scarring, especially if several lymph nodes were removed during surgery. Lymphedema occurs when the lymph system becomes congested and fluid builds up, causing swelling in the affected area (arm, leg, trunk). Lymphedema may cause heaviness or pain, and it increases the risk for skin infections. It can occur immediately or long after treatment has ended.

Additional information is available in our **Everything I Wish I Would Have Known...** series on the website.