

## Radiation Therapy to the Abdomen

You and your doctor have chosen radiation therapy as part of your cancer treatment. This handout describes:

- What to expect.
- How to care for yourself during treatment.
- How to reduce side effects and increase your comfort during treatment.

*If you have any questions, please ask your doctor or nurse.*

Most often, 25 to 35 radiation treatments are prescribed. The radiation treatment itself is just like having an X-ray. It is not painful; you will not feel anything.

### Treatment Planning

Once the decision to proceed with radiation has been made, you will be scheduled for a planning session or a simulation. This session will last between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

During this session, your doctor will take X-rays that will help target the radiation treatment area.

### Treatment Schedule

The treatments are given Monday through Friday. Your therapist will work with you to set up daily appointment times, each lasting 15 to 20 minutes. While the actual treatments take only a few minutes, it is best to allow an hour for:

- X-rays.
- Meetings with your doctor or nurse.
- Any unexpected delays.

X-rays are done weekly to assure the precision of your position on the table. The X-rays are not used to diagnose problems and do not assess treatment effects.

You will meet with your doctor at least once a week on \_\_\_\_\_.  
Your treatment and side effects are checked during these visits. Any concerns about your disease and treatment can be discussed at this time.

## **Skin Marks**

Often, permanent marks called tattoos are used to identify the exact site of the treatment area. These marks are freckle-sized and will not fade. You may wash your skin in this area as usual.

Sometimes, ink pen marks are used. To prevent the loss of these marks, clear medical tape is often placed over the ink. Do not remove this tape or the marks. Take care when you bathe so that you do not wash off the marks. If your marks start to fade, please tell your therapist. Do not redraw them yourself. If you are allergic to tape, tell your therapist or nurse.

## **Common Side Effects**

### *Nausea and Vomiting*

Parts of your stomach and small intestine may be included in the radiation treatment area. This can irritate the lining of your stomach and small intestine and may cause nausea. Many patients develop nausea after about 5 to 10 treatments (1 to 2 weeks). But this varies with each person. You may develop nausea sooner, later, or not at all. Nausea is often worse if radiation and chemotherapy are given at the same time.

Your nausea may or may not cause you to vomit. Some patients have nausea within a few hours after their radiation treatment. Others have nausea when they try to eat.

**Let your doctor or nurse know if you start to feel queasy or vomit and at what times of the day it seems better or worse.** There are many different medicines that your doctor can prescribe for you. Some you can take before your treatment to prevent nausea.

### *Diarrhea*

Part of your intestine or bowel may be in the treatment area. The intestine's rapidly-dividing cells are more sensitive to the radiation. As a result, abdominal cramping and diarrhea can occur. This effect may be worse if you are having chemotherapy and radiation at the same time.

If you have diarrhea, tell your doctor or nurse. Be sure to contact them if you have diarrhea 4 or more times in a 24-hour period, as this can lead to dehydration. Your doctor or nurse may suggest a low fiber diet. Or, your doctor may prescribe medicine, such as **Imodium<sup>®</sup> A-D (loperamide hydrochloride)**.

Be sure to stay well-hydrated. During your treatment, you should drink at least 8 8-ounce glasses or 64 ounces of non-carbonated, non-caffeine fluids, such as water, juice, or sports drinks daily.

## *Loss of Appetite*

You may not feel like eating during your treatment for many reasons. You may:

- Be full after eating very small portions.
- Have nausea or vomiting and not feel like eating at all.

Not eating can lead to weight loss, weakness and fatigue, which can make it difficult for you to perform your usual activities. If you have nausea, let your doctor or nurse know. Your doctor can prescribe medicine that you can take before meals to help relieve your nausea. If cooking odors bother you, eat foods that are lukewarm or room temperature.

If you find that you become full quickly, try eating 5 or 6 small meals instead of 3 larger meals during the day. **Try to avoid drinking liquids 30 minutes before you eat and try not to drink with your meals.**

Try to eat high-protein, high-calorie foods, such as cheese, whole milk, yogurt, eggs, puddings and ice cream. Your doctor or nurse may suggest a diet supplement such as Ensure® or Boost® for added extra calories and protein. If you would like more diet information during treatment, your nurse can give you some suggestions or refer you to a dietician.

## *Fatigue*

Fatigue is a common side effect, but varies with each patient. Stress about your illness, daily trips for treatment and the effects of radiation on normal cells may make you more tired.

Fatigue often begins after 10 treatments. It is often worse at the end of the week, but seems to improve over the weekend. It may last several weeks to several months after your treatment has ended.

Plan activities early in the week, when energy levels are higher. Try to keep regular hours, getting up at the same time 7 days a week. Try to keep active and exercise if you can. It is important not to overexert yourself. If you become tired, plan for rest periods during your day.

## **Health Information Resources**

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the Prentice Women's Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to [hlc@nmh.org](mailto:hlc@nmh.org).

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at [www.nmh.org](http://www.nmh.org).

*Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar a el departamento de representantes para pacientes al 312-926-3112.*

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