

Radiation Therapy to the Brain

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, 10 to 30 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. Before the filming starts, you will be fitted with a special device made of perforated plastic. It will be molded to the shape of your head and is attached to the treatment table. This will hold your head still to help insure the correct position of your head during the treatments.

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.

Common Side Effects

Radiation is a very specific treatment. It affects only the area where the beams are aimed. As a result, you can expect to have side effects only in the treatment area. The side effects are cumulative. This means that at first you will feel no effect, but the effects will develop as you get more treatments. You can expect most of the effects listed below to start after 10 to 15 radiation treatments. After your radiation is over, the effects will get slightly worse for the first 5 days. After this time, healing will begin and you will slowly start feeling better.

Edema/Steroid Side Effects

Please tell your doctor if your brain tumor symptoms are getting worse. This could be due to edema (brain swelling), a common short-term side effect. Your doctor may prescribe medicines (steroids) to lessen the swelling.

Common side effects of steroids are:

- Increased appetite.
- Weight gain.
- Change in sleep patterns.

Nausea and Vomiting

Sometimes patients may develop some nausea with or without vomiting. This nausea may be persistent and make you lose your appetite. **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.

Skin Changes

During radiation you may notice some changes to the skin on your forehead, ears and scalp. Often, skin in the area may become dry, itchy and peel. Or, it may darken in color or become red and irritated. If your ears are in the treatment area, they may also become itchy and sore. You may even notice that your hearing is affected. Please tell your doctor or nurse so your doctor can prescribe medicines to decrease these side effects.

To ease discomfort and protect your treated skin from more irritation, follow these guidelines:

- Clean the area with a mild shampoo, such as baby shampoo or bath soap for sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are: Basis® for Sensitive Skin, Dove® for Sensitive Skin or Neutrogena® Unscented. Avoid shampoo or soaps that are heavily scented or anti-bacterial.
- Use lukewarm water. Hot water can further irritate the skin.
- Gently clean using a soft cloth or your hand.
- Pat your skin dry. Do not rub.
- Do not shave the area being treated with radiation.

- Do not use heating pads or ice packs on the treated area. Extreme temperatures can be more irritating.
- For head coverings, choose cotton or soft knit fabrics. Some fabrics like wool may be irritating.

If you are concerned about the changes to your skin, please talk with your doctor or nurse.

Your doctor or nurse may also suggest special creams or lotions to help moisturize your skin in the treatment area, such as Remedy® Skin Repair Cream. **Do not put any cream on your skin within 2 hours of your treatment, as this will make your skin more sensitive to the effects of radiation.**

Hair Loss

During radiation to your brain, you may start to lose hair after 10 to 15 treatments. Hair loss depends on the:

- Size of the treatment area.
- Amount of radiation that is given.
- Use of other treatments, such as chemotherapy.

Your doctor or nurse will discuss with you if your hair loss is likely to be permanent. If the loss is expected to be short-term, you will start to see hair grow back about 2 to 3 months after therapy is completed. It may take 6 months to 1 year for maximum regrowth. A change of texture and/or hair color may be noted when the hair grows back.

During the period of hair loss, many patients wear attractive scarves, baseball caps and/or wigs. When you are outside, it is very important that you always cover your head to protect your scalp from sun and wind.

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.

Keep your brain active with activities like reading, crossword puzzles, word finds, etc.

If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, talk to your doctor or nurse.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312-926-3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Patient Representatives Department at 312-926-3112, TDD/TTY 312-944-2358 and/or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312-926-1920, TDD/TTY 312-695-3661.

Developed by: Radiation Oncology

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900898 (9/14)