

# Radiation Therapy Gynecologic Cancers



**About the Radiation Oncology Team:** Radiation oncologists are the doctors who oversee the care of people undergoing radiation treatment. Other members involved in the radiation oncology team include radiation therapists, radiation oncology nurses, medical physicists, dosimetrists, social workers, dietitians and communication clerks.

**Understanding Radiation Therapy:** Radiation therapy is used to kill tumours, control tumour growth or to relieve symptoms. Radiation works within tumour cells by damaging their ability to multiply. When these cells die, the body naturally eliminates them. Healthy cells in the treated area will be affected by the radiation, but, unlike cancerous cells, they are able to heal themselves.

## **Medical Imaging:**

During a course of radiation, medical imaging (similar to x-ray or CT scans) will be used by your radiation oncology team to ensure you are in the correct position. These images may also be used for clinical development and/or to aid in the education of health care team members within Radiation Oncology. Your personal health information will be protected according to the Personal Health Information Act of Manitoba.

**Possible Side Effects:** Radiation affects each person differently. Radiation only affects the area being treated. The side effects from radiation can include:

- **Fatigue:** is a daily lack of energy; a feeling of tiredness, weakness or exhaustion. It may come on suddenly and it does not result from activity or exertion. It usually starts during your second to third week of radiation treatments and progresses as the treatments continue. Fatigue will usually subside within eight to twelve weeks after your last day of treatment.
- **Bladder Irritation:** Usually starts during the third week of treatments. You may have the urge to urinate more often, have a burning sensation during urination and / or have an unpleasant odor associated with your urine.
- **Rectal Irritation:** May begin two to four weeks after starting treatment. You may have pain or an itchy feeling when having a bowel movement. Your stool may become softer and you may have more frequent bowel movements. If you have had hemorrhoids in the past, they may flare up again during treatment. Having a sitz bath can help relieve some discomfort.
- **Abdominal Cramping and Gas:** You may feel bloated and have an increase in gas in your bowels during treatment.
- **Nausea and Vomiting:** Treatments (radiation and / or chemotherapy combined) may cause you to feel nauseated or feel sick to your stomach. This usually occurs within two to four weeks of treatment. There are drugs called anti-emetics that can be prescribed which can help relieve nausea and prevent nausea and vomiting.
- **Vaginal Irritation:** You may have vaginal irritation and discharge throughout treatment. The vagina may become narrower and become less flexible. You may require a vaginal dilator to help prevent this from happening.

- **Skin Reaction:** Tends to occur about two to six weeks after starting treatment. The skin will start to appear pink, resembling a sunburn. As treatment progresses, the severity of the skin reaction will progress. You are more likely to get a skin reaction between folds or creases (i.e. the groin area and in between the buttocks).
  - The initial skin reaction may present as erythema; the skin will start to appear pink, resembling a sunburn, may become dry and itchy.
  - The skin may further progress to dry desquamation; the skin may become increasingly red, tender and dry. It may become scaly and begin to peel.
  - If dry desquamation has occurred, the skin may progress to moist desquamation. The skin becomes thin, blistered and begins to weep. The fluid may be clear or milky in color and / or have an odor. At this point, further management with dressing changes and prescription creams may be required.
- **Menopause / Fertility:** Radiation to the pelvis may affect your sexual organs and how they work. If you have any questions or concerns please talk to your radiation oncologist.
- **Hair Loss:** Usually occurs within the treated area (pubic region) two to four weeks after treatments start. Re-growth of the hair usually occurs three to six months after your last day of treatment. Hair may not grow back in some areas depending on the dose of radiation received.

If you experience any of these side effects, inform a health care professional (radiation oncologist, nurse or radiation therapist).

Most of these side effects will begin to heal within two to four weeks after your radiation treatments are complete and it may take up to six to eight weeks for them to go away. Late side effects may begin six months after radiation therapy is over. Late side effects will vary depending on the area that was treated and the radiation dose received. Everyone reacts to radiation differently and every patient's healing process is not the same. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the late side effects, please ask your radiation oncologist.

**Caring For Yourself During Treatment:** It is important to take care of yourself while you are having treatment. Here are some helpful hints that will aid in treating and coping with the side effects of treatment.

- Rest when required and eat a well balanced diet. This will increase your energy level and help repair healthy tissue. If you are losing weight, eating foods that are high in protein and calories may help to maintain your weight. If you are experiencing ongoing weight loss, ask to see a dietitian.
- If you are experiencing nausea and / or vomiting, try having several small meals a day and eat slowly. Try eating foods that are cold or at room temperature, bland and / or starchy foods (i.e. crackers or toast).
- Drink 8-10 (237 mL / 8 oz.) glasses of fluid per day and empty your bladder frequently. This helps ensure regular flow of urine, prevents infection and dehydration.
- Avoid coffee, black tea, alcohol, caffeinated beverages and spices as they can irritate the bladder and bowels.
- Avoid all tobacco products.
- If you are experiencing diarrhea or abdominal cramping, limit foods that are high fat and high fiber. Spicy foods should also be limited. Inform your health care professional as they can give you tips that will help control your diarrhea and / or abdominal cramping.
- If you are experiencing rectal irritation, you can have a *\*sitz bath* to help relieve some discomfort. Refer to the "sitz bath" procedure.

Begin recommended skin care on the first day of radiation treatments and continue until the skin reaction has healed. Skin reactions in the treatment area may continue to develop for approximately two weeks after your last treatment.

## **Skin Care:**

- Report any rash or break in the skin to your therapist or nurse. Prevent infection with good hand washing and skin care.
- Use a *\*gentle soap* (e.g. Dove).
- Use *\*unscented lotions* (e.g. Glaxal Base or Lubriderm cream) on the area of treatment two to three times per day. (If the skin breaks open, refrain from using skin products and report to a radiation therapist, nurse or radiation oncologist as soon as possible).
- When bathing, use a clean washcloth and do not scrub treatment area. Pat skin to dry, using a soft towel.
- Wear loose cotton clothing (if required).
- During treatment protect area from sun and wind. Do not expose treatment area to sun during treatment and after treatment until reactions have subsided and then use a high factor sunblock. Sunbathing and use of tanning booths are NEVER recommended for any person at any time.
- Do not use any sunscreen, scented soaps, powders, icepacks, heating pads or hot water bottles in the treatment area until radiation treatment course is entirely completed, and all skin reactions have healed.
- Do not scratch. Avoid any friction in the affected area.
- Avoid smoking - smoking interferes with the healing and increases itching.
- Avoid hot tubs, saunas and tanning booths.

*\* We recommend that you have these items at home for use for the duration of your radiation treatments.*

## **Sitz Bath Directions:**

1. Use a sitz bath that fits the toilet or use a bath tub.
2. Use water or saline, should be luke warm 40-43 C (104-109 F).
3. Maximum 10 -15 mins. Repeat up to four times per day and / or after each bowel movement.
4. Gently pat area dry with a soft clean towel or expose area to room air.

## **Recipe for Saline:**

1. Heat 1 L (1 Qt.) of water to boiling. Remove from heat.
2. Add 5 -10 mL (1.5 - 2 tsp.) table salt. Stir until dissolved.
3. Pour solution into clean 1 L (1 Qt.) container.
4. Make a fresh solution each evening. Cover and leave out overnight to cool to room temperature. The solution is only good for a 24 hour period.

**NOTE:** If you required a full bladder for your CT scan, you are required to have a full bladder for treatment each day. One hour before your radiation appointment, empty your bladder. Drink 500 ml of water (about 2 glasses of water) an hour before your appointment. Ensure to finish all fluids within 20 minutes of your appointment.

**Brachytherapy:** If you require internal radiation therapy known as “Brachytherapy”, there will be a scheduled education session with the nurse during the course of your radiation treatments. The appointment will be on your weekly schedule.

**Support:** At CCMB we have many different support systems available to you. If you have not received a “Patient & Family Information Guide”, please let your radiation therapist know. This booklet outlines many of the support systems to help you during this period in your life (listed below). If you have interest in any of these services or want a referral, please ask your health care professional or contact the phone numbers provided.

- Dietitian
- Guardian Angel Room
- Patient & Family Resource Centre
- Lennox Bell Lodge (for out of town patients), phone: 204-787-4271
- Volunteer Driver Program (for city residents), phone: 1-800-263-6750
- Patient Representative
- Sexuality Counselor
- Psychosocial Services
- Spiritual Health Specialist

**Medical Contact Information:**

Medical issues during treatment hours: Contact 204-787-2252 or 204-787-2180.

Urgent medical issues after hours or weekends: Contact the radiation oncologist on-call: 204-787-2071.

Emergencies: Go directly to your closest Emergency Department, or dial 911.