

Information for Patients Receiving Radiation Therapy: External Beam Treatment for Prostate Cancer

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Why is radiation therapy used to treat prostate cancer?

Prostate cancer may be treated with a combination of treatments such as surgery, hormone therapy, and radiation therapy. Radiation therapy uses radiation from high-energy X-ray machines to kill cancer cells. Radiation lowers the chance of the cancer returning in the prostate or prostate bed and lymph node areas.

If hormone therapy is to be a part of your treatment, you will be given a separate information sheet.

Is there anything that I have to do before my treatment planning appointment?

Your bladder and rectum should be about the same fullness for every treatment. The prostate moves a lot depending on the fullness of your bladder and rectum. You must have a bowel movement the morning of your treatment planning appointment. We will not be able to do your CT scan if you have not had a bowel movement that day.

Three days before your simulation “marking” appointment:

- Drink at least 8-10 large cups of water each day.
- Take **34 grams of PEG 3350** each day.

To make sure you have a bladder that is the same fullness for all of your appointments:

- Empty your bladder **45 minutes before** your appointment.
- Drink 500 mL or 16 oz of water.
- Do not empty your bladder again until after your treatment is over.
- Do not drink any other fluids while you are waiting for treatment.

**What are your questions? Please ask.
We are here to help you.**

What will happen on the day I come for my treatment planning?

Your first visit to the radiation therapy department is called your “treatment planning appointment”. This will take about 1 hour.

A CT scan will be done with you lying on your back with your hands resting on your chest. The CT scan does not hurt and you do not have to hold your breath. It is important that you lie still. Your Radiation Therapists will make every effort to make you comfortable during the CT scan. They will explain every step of what they are doing. The measurements from your CT scan will be used to plan your treatments.

As the last step, your Radiation Therapists will give you 3 small tattoo marks on your pelvis (one on each hip and one on the front of your pelvis). These marks are approximately the size of a pen tip. They will be used each treatment day to position you. After your treatment planning appointment, you may have some extra ink on your skin. It can be washed off when you get home.

At your treatment planning appointment, your Radiation Treatment Team members will answer any questions you may have. Many people find it helpful to bring someone along to this appointment.

How long will it be until I start my radiation treatments?

After your treatment planning appointment, you will usually wait a few weeks before your treatments start. You will be notified of the start date for your radiation treatment as soon as your planning is completed and a time has been booked for the radiation treatment machine. Every effort will be made to start your treatments as soon as possible.

After your treatment planning appointment, you may need to have an MRI scan. You will be notified by the clerks of this appointment.

How long will my treatments take?

You should expect to have 6 to 8 weeks of radiation treatments. The treatments are given 5 days a week, Monday to Friday, except for holidays. Each treatment appointment will take about 15 minutes. You will be expected to come early so you can empty your bladder and drink 500 mL or 16 oz of water (45 minutes before treatment).

Once a week, you may see your Radiation Oncologist and/or Oncology Nurse for a checkup after your treatment. If you are booked to see your Radiation Oncologist or Nurse, be prepared to be here longer that day.

What do I need to do to prepare for my treatments each day?

Before each daily treatment, make sure you have had a bowel movement. You may not be able to have your treatment if you have not had a bowel movement.

- Drink at least 8-10 large cups of water each day
- Take 17 grams of PEG 3350 Daily

45 minutes before your treatment, empty your bladder fully and then drink 500 mL of water right away. Do not use the washroom until after your treatment.

What side effects will I have from the radiation treatments?

The first 2 weeks of treatment should be very easy, with very few side effects except for a little tiredness. For most people, side effects tend to appear towards the end of the course of radiation treatments and peak 1 or 2 weeks after the treatments are finished. They go away over the next 4 to 8 weeks.

During the last few weeks of treatment, most people have:

Fatigue (tiredness)

This is not usually severe. You may be more tired after a usual activity and may need a nap or rest after each treatment. You will be given an information sheet with suggestions to help you cope with fatigue.

Skin reactions

Your skin in the treatment area may become dry and itchy or pink. Some dark-skinned patients may have increased darkening of the skin. Skin reactions may happen on the front, back, or sides of your pelvis.

You are allowed to wash and bathe. Your tattoo marks will not wash off. Try not to scratch or rub the affected area. You will also be given a separate information sheet with suggestions for skin care during radiation therapy.

Irritation of the bladder or bowel

During the last few weeks of treatment, most people feel some irritation or soreness of the bladder or rectum. You may be passing your urine more often, sometimes with a slower stream (cystitis). Your bowel movements may be more frequent, watery (diarrhea), and painful. You will be given information sheets with suggestions to help you cope with changes to your bladder or bowel.

Irritation of the anus

If you have hemorrhoids, they may become inflamed. The doctor may prescribe a cream or suppository that will help with the discomfort. The skin around the anus can also become reddened. To help ease the discomfort, most people find that taking a sitz bath helps. Please read the information about sitz baths in the Skin Care During Radiation Therapy information sheet given to you.

How will the treatments affect my sexuality?

Most people with cancer (and their partners) experience a number of physical, emotional, and practical changes. These changes can happen during treatment and recovery and may affect your sexual health.

There may be changes in how you feel that may affect how you respond sexually. Reactions of a partner can also add to how you see yourself as a sexual being. You may notice periods of time during treatment and recovery when you have little interest in sex. This may be upsetting to you and your partner. You may have worries (about your cancer, treatments, and how the illness is affecting your life) and these can affect both your own and your partner's interest in and enjoyment of sex.

If you are single, you may have different worries and challenges, such as how to talk about sexuality and cancer with a new partner.

Radiation in the pelvic area is likely to cause some sexual changes. What these changes may be, and the degree of change experienced, will depend on the type of cancer, its location and size, your age, and the type of treatment you are having.

Talk to your doctor, Radiation Therapist or nurse about sexual activity during treatment and recovery. Usually there is no reason to stop sexual activity. You will not pass on radiation to your partner.

Depending on the location and dose of radiation, some men will have problems getting or maintaining an erection. Some men may have difficulty getting an erection that is as firm as it used to be. Erectile changes from treatment are due to nerve damage and scarring that cause damage in the blood vessels. Some men find that erectile changes don't begin until several months after completing radiation treatment. Most men notice that most of the changes happen by the end of the second year, although some men report that they experience changes for up to five years. There may be ways to improve erectile function. Often it is better to start treating erectile difficulties as the changes happen. Talk to your Radiation Oncologist or nurse as soon as possible.

There are other reasons for changes in erectile function, such as fatigue, feeling unwell, fear of loose bowels, or general worries about the cancer.

These changes are usually temporary.

During treatment and depending on the area receiving radiation, some men experience a burning sensation with ejaculation and orgasm. This is normal. Other side effects of radiation, like fatigue and skin irritation, can also affect sexual activity.

Radiation in the pelvic area may affect your future ability to father a child. Sperm banking may be an option that needs to be discussed before radiation begins. If you or your partner would like more information about sexual changes, please ask your nurse, Radiation Therapist, or Radiation Oncologist. There are a number of health professionals available in the Cancer Centre who can discuss concerns about sexuality with you (and your partner).

Coping with cancer

Being diagnosed with and treated for cancer is stressful. It is normal for you and your family to feel worried, fearful, vulnerable, frustrated, or sad. Depending on your type of cancer and your treatment, you and your family may be dealing with several adjustments and challenges that can affect your everyday activities.

These may include:

- Physical changes, such as feeling tired, voice changes, or swallowing problems.
- Emotional and psychological changes, such as feeling depressed or anxious, body image concerns, dealing with loss and uncertainty, or difficulty coping.
- Social and family changes, such as changes in your relationship with family and friends or being on sick leave from work.
- Changes in your relationship with your partner, such as tension, loss of affection, or feeling distant.
- Financial worries, such as reduced income or the cost of medications.
- Sexual health changes, such as loss of sexual interest or the ability to have an orgasm.
- Not being able to do the things you enjoy.
- Spiritual challenges.

If you find that you are struggling with any of these concerns or others and would like help, please talk to your doctor, nurse, or Radiation Therapist. They can refer you to a psychosocial oncology specialist. There are also support groups in your community where you can talk with or listen to others who have similar cancer experiences and learn more about cancer and how to live well with it. Information about these groups is available at the Cancer Centre or through

the Canadian Cancer Society – Nova Scotia Division. Call 1-888-939-3333 or visit www.cancer.ca.

If you are interested in online groups, contact Cancer Chat Canada. Visit www.cancerchatcanada.ca or call 1-800-663-3333 ext. 4965. Health professionals from Canadian Cancer Centres lead these groups.

Questions you may want to ask your health care team:

- If I am taking hormones, what will be the timing of my hormone and radiation treatments?
- Do I have to do anything to prepare for my radiation markings or treatments?
- What happens if I can't hold my bladder full?
- What happens if I have not had a bowel movement before my treatment?
- Can I bathe or wash?
- What should I expect to happen during my treatments?
- How will I cope with the side effects?
- How will I know if the treatments are working?
- What happens when the treatments end?
- Do I need to come back for a checkup?
- Will I have any long-term side effects from my treatments?
- Will the radiation treatments cause sterility?
- Who can I talk to if I have questions about supportive care; for example, medication costs, insurance, home care, transportation, emotional concerns, or any other questions?
- Is there a research study for my cancer type that might be appropriate for me (or that I could be involved in)?
- Will I need an MRI scan?

Looking for more health information?

Find this brochure and all our patient resources here: <http://library.nshealth.ca/PatientGuides>
Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.
For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

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NSCCP-1235 Updated April 2018 ©Nova Scotia Health Authority