

# Radiation Treatment



This information sheet will provide you with information about radiation treatment and the support and information your doctors, nurses and the Cancer Society can offer you. We hope it answers some of the questions you may have before and during treatment. We can't advise about the best treatment for you personally. You need to discuss this with your doctors.

Radiation treatment treats cancer using high-energy radiation to destroy cancer cells or slow down their growth. Radiation treatment only affects the part of the body where the beam or beams are aimed. Radiation treatment is the main treatment for some cancers. It may also be used in combination with surgery, chemotherapy or hormone therapy.

## Types of radiation treatment

There are two types of radiation treatment:

- External beam treatment (the most common). The radiation beam focuses from a machine (a linear accelerator) outside the body on to the area affected by the cancer.
- Internal radiation treatment (brachytherapy) Radioactive materials are put into your body, or on or near the cancer.

## How radiation treatment works

Radiation treatment attacks cancer cells that are dividing. It also attacks normal tissue.

The damage to normal tissue causes side effects. However, normal cells recover and the cancer cells do not.

## Having treatment



*Photography by Louise Goossens*

You will be referred to a radiation oncologist (a doctor who treats cancer with radiation). They will decide on the best way to treat your cancer. Sometimes the treatment is to cure the cancer or prevent it coming back for a long time.

Sometimes radiation is used to improve symptoms such as pain or a cough. In this case you do not need as many radiation doses.

Staff plan your treatment during two sessions (called simulation) and design it just for you. You will have your course of radiation treatment over several days or weeks.

Each treatment is called a fraction. Radiation therapists give you daily treatment from Monday to Friday with a rest at the weekend to help normal cells recover. External radiation is almost always given as an outpatient. Internal radiation requires a short stay in hospital.

## When you arrive for treatment

Staff ask you to change into a gown or trousers. You see the radiation therapist who gives your treatment at treatment sessions. You can see a nurse if you need to. The appointment takes about 10 to 20 minutes.



Photography by Louise Goossens

The machine is on for a few minutes, but you are in the room for longer to make sure you are in the right position. You see the doctor once a week or more often if there are any problems.

## Side effects

Side effects depend on the:

- amount of radiation given
- area of body treated
- individual response
- type of radiation.

## Acute side effects

- come on during or soon after treatment ends.
- usually peak about a week after treatment finishes.

A radiation beam or beams cause inflammation as it passes through normal tissue. Most side effects improve around six weeks after the treatment has finished.

## Late effects:

- appear many months or years later
- are caused by scarring.

Staff plan your treatment carefully to reduce the risks of side effects.

## Feeling tired

This is the major side effect of radiation treatment. Try to plan rest times during the day and go to bed early. Eating well, drinking plenty of fluids and having some exercise can help.

## Effects on the skin

Staff will teach you about caring for your skin. The skin in the treatment area might become dry, flaky, red, and itchy or sore (similar to sunburn). Your skin may become more sensitive to the sun. Try to keep treated areas out of the sun during and after treatment. Do not apply anything to the treated skin unless you've discussed it with your therapists.

## Not wanting to eat

You may not feel like eating during treatment especially if you are having radiation to your head and neck, stomach or bowel. Try to eat small meals often. Soups, smoothies, ice-cream and yoghurt are all good choices if your appetite is poor. Remember to drink plenty of clear fluid even if you cannot eat.

## Feeling sick or vomiting

This may happen if you are having treatment to your oesophagus (gullet), stomach, bowel, pelvis or brain. Your radiation oncologist can prescribe anti-sickness medication if you do feel sick.

## Bowel irritation

You may have some of the following symptoms if you are having radiation to the pelvis, colon, rectum or anus:

- diarrhoea
- blood in your bowel motions
- needing to rush to the toilet
- leakage from the bowel
- feeling that your bowel has not emptied properly
- passing a lot of wind
- pain.

Once treatment has finished these symptoms gradually settle down. There is some permanent scarring of the bowel.

## Bladder problems

Radiation to the bladder, cervix, prostate or uterus may cause bladder changes, such as:

- needing to pass urine often
- a burning sensation when you pass urine
- not being able to wait when you need to pass urine
- getting up in the night to pass urine.

If you are having these symptoms, talk to your doctor. These symptoms will gradually settle.

## Head and neck problems

Radiation treatment to your head and neck can give you a sore or dry mouth or throat.

Try some of these ideas:

- Suck ice blocks.
- Drink lots of fluids and try carrying a sipper bottle.
- Moisten food with butter, sauces or cream.
- Don't smoke.
- Blend food, eat ice-cream and soups.

It's best not to drink alcohol until side effects have settled. If you have pain, talk to your doctor.

## Hair loss

Hair loss only happens when you are having radiation treatment to the brain.

The government pays for the cost of a wig. To get your wig paid for, you need a certificate from your doctor that says you're having radiation treatment.

## How will I know my treatment is working?

You may be able to tell if your treatment is working by improvement in symptoms or by noting a decrease in the size of a lump that you can see and feel or both.

Sometimes only your doctors can tell you whether the radiation treatment is getting rid of the cancer or not. They do this by talking to you, examining you and carrying out blood tests and scans. Sometimes, it is necessary to have many tests during treatment to see how the treatment is working.

## What happens when the treatment ends?

Only do what you feel comfortable doing, as you did during your treatment. You may be able to return to your normal life immediately, or build up to it a bit at a time. You may be going on to another form of treatment and so need to take it easier for a bit longer. Continue to ask for help if you need it. It is always better to ask than to do too much.

## Relationships and sexuality

The side effects of radiation treatment may mean that you do not feel like having sex because you feel unattractive, too tired, nauseated or are in pain. It is important to keep communication open with partners – for both of you to share your fears and needs. You may be able to find creative ways to meet these needs and cope with the fears.

## Support

### Emotional support

It may be helpful to talk about your feelings with people close to you. Talking to other people with cancer may also help.

## Talking to children

How much you tell children will depend on how old they are. Young children need to know that it is not their fault. They also need to know that you may have to go into hospital. Slightly older children can probably understand a simple explanation of what is wrong. Teenagers can understand much more.

All children need to know what will happen to them while you are in hospital – who will look after them and how their daily life will be affected.

## Information and support

The Cancer Society provides confidential information and support. You can talk about your concerns and needs with experienced cancer nurses. Call **0800 CANCER (226 237)** or phone your local Cancer Society.

## Complementary and Alternative therapies

It is important to let your doctor know if you are taking any complementary or alternative therapies because some treatments may be harmful if they are taken at the same time as conventional treatments.

## Interpreting services

New Zealand's Health and Disability Code states that everyone has the right to have an interpreter present during a medical consultation.

## Diet and food safety

A balanced nutritious diet will help to keep you as well as possible and cope with any side effects of treatment. The Cancer Society's booklet called *Eating Well/Kia Pai te Kai* gives useful advice and recipes. Call 0800 CANCER (226 237) or phone your local Cancer Society or download it from our website at [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz). The hospital will also have a dietitian who can help.

## Questions you may wish to ask

Ask as many questions as you want to. It's easy to forget the questions you want to ask when you see your specialist or nurse, so write them down as you think of them and take your list with you to your appointment.

For cancer information and support phone **0800 CANCER (226 237)** or go to [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz)

## Suggested websites

The following websites have information on radiation treatment:

- Macmillan Cancer Support (UK)  
[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)
- Cancer Council of Victoria (Australia)  
[www.cancervic.org.au/](http://www.cancervic.org.au/)
- National Cancer Institute (USA)  
[www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo](http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo)

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