Possible Side Effects of Radiation Treatment for Prostate Cancer

The radiation used to destroy cancer cells can also hurt normal cells in the surrounding area. Thus, side effects from radiation treatment are directly related to the area of the body being treated. Side effects are caused by the cumulative effect of radiation on the cells; therefore most patients do not experience any side effects until a few weeks into their treatment. While side effects may be unpleasant, there are treatments to help deal with them. Most side effects are temporary, disappearing gradually after therapy is complete.

Most radiation oncologists see their patients at least once a week while the patient is receiving treatment. This visit with the healthcare team serves as an opportunity to ask questions, discuss any side effects, and implement any necessary interventions to help relieve the side effects. However, you can report concerning symptoms any time to your treatment team.

Short Term Side Effects

The following list includes some of the most common side effects of radiation therapy for prostate cancer, including external beam or brachytherapy. Remember that the treatments can affect each patient differently, and you may not experience these particular side effects. Talk with your radiation oncologist and health care team about what you can expect from your specific treatment.

- **Skin irritation**: The skin in the treatment area may become red, irritated, dry, or sensitive. This may progress to look like a sunburn. Treat the skin gently to avoid further irritation, and bathe carefully, using only warm water and mild soap. Avoid perfumed or scented lotions or soaps, as these may cause further irritation.
- **Fatigue** is very common with radiation treatment and tends to begin a few weeks into therapy. Fatigue typically resolves slowly over the weeks and months following treatment.
- **Irritation to the rectal and urinary tract tissue** can cause bowel or urinary urgency, diarrhea, incontinence or discomfort with bowel movements or urination. These symptoms tend to resolve within a few weeks of finishing treatment. Drink plenty of fluids. Talk to your healthcare team about ways to manage these symptoms. In some patients, these problems can linger after treatment.
- **Loss of hair** in the pelvic area. Hair typically starts to regrow a month or so after treatment. However, your hair might not grow back exactly as it was before treatment and for some, the hair loss becomes permanent.
- **Reduced blood counts**, including neutropenia, anemia or thrombocytopenia (low platelet count).

Long-Term Side Effects

The side effects discussed thus far tend to occur during treatment up until a few months after treatment. Long-term effects can occur months to many years after cancer treatment and the risks vary depending on the areas included in the field of radiation and the radiation techniques that were used, as these continue to develop and improve. Some of the potential long-term side effects of radiation to the prostate includes:

- **Erectile dysfunction** can occur after radiation therapy, sometimes months after treatment ends. For some men, medications or other treatments can help. A couples therapist can also help you and your partner cope with these changes in your relationship.
- **There is a low risk of developing a second cancer in or near the radiation field.** These are called secondary cancers, and they develop as a result of the exposure of healthy tissue to radiation. Modern radiation techniques are designed to limit this exposure, but it is not always possible to prevent all exposure and still achieve the desired outcomes.
- **Most men will be sterile after radiation treatment for prostate cancer.** Talk to your oncology team about sperm banking if
you wish to father a child in the future.

- **Incontinence** can become a long term side effect due to the development of scar tissue in the areas that control urine flow.

After treatment, talk with your oncology team about receiving a **survivorship care plan**, which can help you manage the transition to survivorship and learn about life after cancer.