What are the side effects of radiation therapy?

The side effects of radiation therapy vary from patient to patient. The side effects are specific to the area being treated, so two patients being treated for different cancers could have very different experiences. It is important to talk to your radiation team about possible side effects and tips for managing them.

Short-Term Side Effects

There are two main types of side effects: acute and chronic. Acute (short-term) side effects occur during the treatment, and typically go away a few weeks after treatment is finished. They may include fatigue, skin reactions, and side effects specific to the area being treated.

Fatigue:

- It has been described as a feeling of exhaustion, feeling completely worn out, feeling that the body is "heavy" and difficult to move, or an inability to concentrate. Fatigue can cause physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion.
- This fatigue is not caused by overactivity and is not usually relieved by rest, yet many people will suggest rest as a way to decrease the fatigue.
- Fatigue is the most common acute side effect of radiation therapy. It is believed to be caused by the tremendous amount of energy that is used by the body to heal itself in response to radiation therapy.
- Most people begin to feel fatigued about 2 weeks after radiation treatments begin. The tired feeling goes away gradually after the treatment is finished. Normal levels of energy generally return a few weeks after completing treatment, but can take as long as a year, particularly if you received chemotherapy as well. For more information on fatigue, go to Side Effect: Fatigue.

Skin Reactions:

- Many patients that receive radiation therapy develop a skin reaction. Each time radiation therapy is delivered, small amounts are absorbed by the skin over the area being treated. Over time, this exposure can lead to a skin reaction.
- About 2 to 3 weeks after your first radiation treatment, you may notice redness and irritation similar to a sunburn. The skin may be itchy, dry, red or sore.
- These changes are an expected part of your therapy and are temporary. In some cases, you may need to stop radiation treatments for a short period to allow the skin to heal. For more information on skin reactions, go to Side Effect: Skin reactions.

The other acute side effects of radiation therapy are typically specific to the area being treated. For example, patients receiving radiation therapy to the stomach or abdomen may have diarrhea and nausea and vomiting, whereas patients receiving treatment to the head and neck area may develop mouth sores or esophagitis. Only patients receiving radiation therapy to the head experience hair loss on the head, called alopecia. Your radiation oncologist and nurse will give you specific instructions on what you can do to help minimize and manage these side effects. For additional information see the Radiation Side Effects Menu.

Long-Term Side Effects

Chronic side effects can occur during treatment and last for many months or years after treatment, or they can develop months to years after radiation therapy. They differ according to the area treated and the total dose of radiation therapy received. During your initial consultation, your radiation oncologist will discuss with you any side effects that you may experience as a result of the radiation therapy treatment planned for you. You are encouraged to take this information into consideration when making decisions about your care.
decisions about your treatment.

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. A survivorship care plan can help you better understand health risks you may face as a result of cancer treatment and what you can do to reduce and monitor for those risks. You can develop your own plan using the OncoLife Survivorship Care Plan tool.

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