Claustrophobia and Anxiety With Mask Use for Radiation Therapy

If you are receiving radiation therapy for head and neck cancer, brain cancer, or brain metastases, then you will most likely have to get a thermoplastic mask made for treatment. The mask is worn every day for treatment. Thermoplastic masks are made of a plastic material and look like mesh. Fear of confined or small places (claustrophobia) can occur during the mask-making process.

Fear of the mask is common. Claustrophobia and anxiety are common. Being proactive about your anxieties will eliminate the potential of treatment disruptions or delays. Having discussions with your oncologist or the therapists about anxieties with the mask have proven to be helpful. The care team can help find a solution that works for you.

What can I do to help ease my anxiety?
There are some tips that you can try that may help reduce anxieties related to the mask during radiation therapy:

- Practice relaxation techniques prior to your simulation and treatments, such as:
  - Mindful meditation.
  - Picturing yourself in a “happy place”.
  - Controlled breathing - slow deep breaths.
  - Listening to soothing or calming music.
  - Ask your provider to see what a mask looks like once it has been molded.
  - Inquire about if it is possible to see a treatment room prior to starting your treatments and see how the mask is clipped to the table.
  - Ask your provider if they can give you an information sheet on the mask-making process.
  - Talk to the therapists about any questions or concerns you have regarding the mask.
  - Make sure you are in a comfortable position prior to mask placement – if you are not, tell the therapists so they can adjust your position.
  - Request that the therapists continue to talk to you while they are molding the mask and explain step-by-step what they are doing.
  - Inquire about the best way to communicate with the therapists once the mask is on.
  - If you have experienced trauma in the past involving a face or head covering, please let your provider know before treatment.
  - Remember that it is normal to feel anxious or to be claustrophobic and discuss this with your provider.

What can my team do to help me?
In some cases, the therapists can remove the part of the mask that covers your eyes or nose to make the mask more comfortable. This may not always be possible depending on the area of the head or neck that is being treated but is worth discussing with your provider. If appropriate, anti-anxiety medications can also be provided. If given medications, you may not be able to drive. You will need someone else to provide you with transportation home.

Ultimately it is the job of your care team to explain the mask making process to you and
ensure that you are prepared, but that is not always the case. Sometimes identifying claustrophobia or anxiety gets overlooked even though it is an essential part of the treatment. It is important to remember that it is normal to feel anxious or claustrophobic and to discuss this with your provider prior to starting treatment.