

Side Effects from Radiation to the Head Area

Side effects may happen because the radiation used to kill cancer can also damage healthy cells in the area around the treatment site. Side effects differ from person to person, ranging from none to severe. Some side effects may not happen until 2 to 3 weeks after you start radiation. Most side effects go away within 2 months after treatment is done.



This handout lists the most common side effects from radiation to the head area. It does not list all possible side effects.

Let your radiation doctor or nurse know if you have any side effects, whether mild or severe.

Skin changes

Your skin in your treatment area may look red, tan or darker for weeks or months. Dry, peeling skin is normal. Other skin changes include itching, swelling, or puffiness.

The skin that was treated may be more sensitive to the sun and it may sunburn easier. If you see sores, blisters or moist areas on your skin, call your doctor or nurse to discuss options.

- **Avoid having your treatment area in the direct sun until all of your radiation treatments are done and your skin has fully healed.**
- Protect your skin from the sun by using sun protective clothing or sitting under an umbrella. This is preferred over sunscreen. Some companies that sell sun protective clothing online are Coolibar and UVSkinz. Choose clothing with a UPF rating of 50 or higher.
- Be careful with skin creams and sunscreens with active ingredients like retinol or salicylic acid because they may bother your skin. Avoid aerosol sunscreens because they may sting or burn.

- Once your treatment area is fully healed, ask your radiation team when it is ok to start using sunscreen.

Ways to manage skin changes

- Avoid shaving the treatment area until skin is fully healed.
- Wash skin and any stickers/markings gently with lukewarm water and mild soap and pat dry. Don't use antibacterial soaps.
- Don't put anything on your skin that is very hot or cold, such as ice or heating pads, until your skin is fully healed.
- Don't rub or scratch the treatment area even if it itches.
- Don't use sticky tape, bandages or band aids on the treatment area unless your team says to do so.
- Tell your radiation doctor or nurse if you have any skin sores blisters or moist areas on your skin.
- Don't put makeup, antiseptics, medicines or perfumes on the treatment area. Use only those lotions and skin products your radiation doctor or nurse suggests.

Fatigue

Fatigue is a common side effect that affects most people. Fatigue can be mild to severe. Some ways to manage fatigue:



Be active. Exercise is the best way to lessen fatigue. Ask your doctor if it's safe for you to exercise. Even 15 or 30 minutes of exercise a day, like walking or gentle stretching, can help give you more energy.



Try to get at least 8 hours of sleep each night. Avoid alcohol and high sugar foods in the evening and caffeine 6 to 8 hours before bed since they may keep you awake. Avoid cell phone and computer use late at night.



Eat and drink well. Try to eat 5 or 6 small meals and snacks rather than 3 large meals. Try to eat high protein foods and avoid foods and drinks with added sugars. Drink 6 to 8 cups of fluids each day, unless your

cancer care team tells you otherwise. If you need help with food and drink choices, you can ask to meet with a dietitian.



Let family and friends help. They can help with chores, rides, shopping and meals.

Hair loss

You may lose hair in the treatment area 2 to 3 weeks after your first radiation treatment. Most people have hair regrowth about 3 to 6 months after treatment. Sometimes hair may not grow back.

Plugged ears

Your ears may feel like they are plugged up if you are getting treatment near your ears.

Questions and concerns

Let your team know if you have any questions or concerns during your treatment.

Call your radiation doctor or nurse right away if you have:

- Trouble hearing
- A bad earache
- Questions or concerns



Call 911 if these problems are new or getting worse:

- Blurry vision or seeing double
- A bad headache that isn't helped by medicine
- Dizziness or feeling like you will pass out
- Confusion or trouble staying awake

This info is a general resource. It is not meant to replace your doctor's advice. Ask your doctor or health care team any questions. Always follow their instructions.