

Spine Radiation Side Effects

Side effects may happen because the high doses of 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.

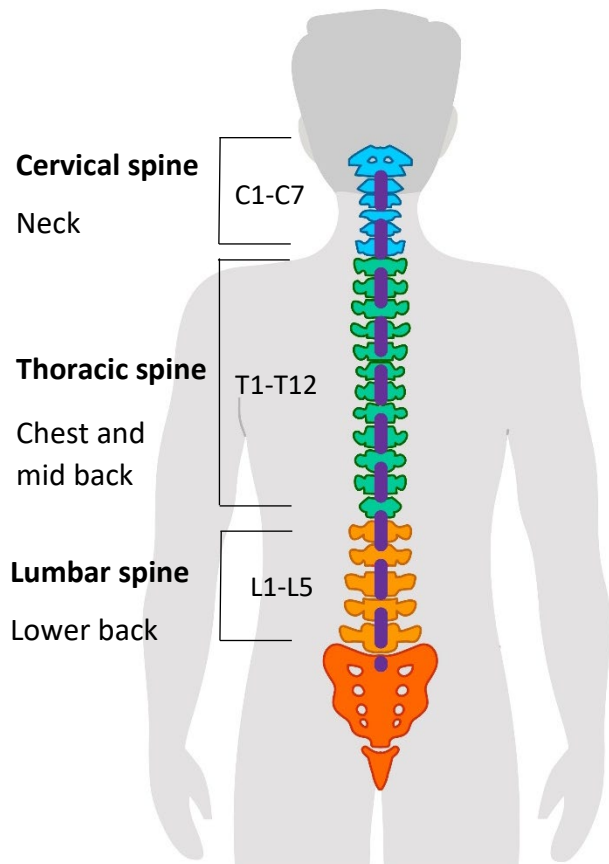


This handout lists the most common side effects from radiation to the spine. It does not list all possible side effects. Tell your radiation doctor or nurse if you have any side effects, whether mild or severe.

Side effects can differ based on which area of the spine is getting radiation.

Cervical or upper thoracic spine radiation may cause throat soreness or a feeling like you have a lump or food stuck in your throat.

Lumbar spine radiation may cause diarrhea or problems with peeing like burning, having to pee often or feeling the urgent need to pee.



Skin changes

Your skin in your treatment area may look red, tan or darker for days or weeks. Dry, peeling skin is normal. Your skin may become swollen or tender. Other skin changes include itching, swelling, or puffiness. Skin may become wet, sore or infected. This is more common in skin folds and places where the skin is very thin.

The skin that was treated may be more sensitive to the sun and it may sunburn easier.

Protect your skin from the sun each day

- **Avoid having your treatment area in the direct sun until all of your radiation treatments are done and your skin has fully healed.** Talk about sun exposure with your doctor.
- 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 sunscreen after treatment as it may cause irritation. Avoid aerosol sunscreens as they may sting or burn. When using sunscreen, use sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of 30 or higher.
- Be careful with skin creams and sunscreens with active ingredients like retinol or salicylic acid because they may bother your skin.

Skin care

- Wash skin and any stickers/markings gently with lukewarm water and mild, unscented soap and pat dry.
- Don't rub or scratch the treatment area even if it itches
- Wear loose fitting clothing around your treatment area.
- 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 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
- Ask your doctor or nurse if you can shave the treated area. If they say yes, use an electric razor and don't use pre or after shave lotion.
- 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. Keep foods around that are easy to fix, such as canned soups and frozen meals. 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. It may start 2 to 3 weeks after your first radiation treatment. It takes about 1 week for all hair in the treatment area to fall out.

Your hair may grow back 3 to 6 months after treatment is done. If the dose of radiation was high, hair may not grow back. Hair regrowth may not look or feel the way it did before. It may be thinner, darker or lighter, or curly instead of straight.

Throat changes

Radiation to the cervical spine and upper chest can cause the lining of your throat to become inflamed and sore. This is called esophagitis. You may feel as if you have a lump in your throat or burning in your chest or throat. You may also have trouble swallowing.

You may notice throat changes 2 to 3 weeks after starting radiation. You will most likely feel better 3 to 4 weeks after radiation has finished.

What you can do

- **Eat small meals and snacks.** It may be easier to eat 5 or 6 small meals and snacks each day instead of 3 large meals.
- **Be careful what you eat when your throat is sore.**
 - Choose foods that are easy to swallow. Cut, blend or shred foods to make them easier to swallow. Cook foods well so they are soft and easy to chew.
 - Eat moist, soft foods such as cooked cereals, mashed potatoes and scrambled eggs. Wet and soften food with gravy, sauce, butter, broth, yogurt or other liquids.
 - Drink cool drinks. Sip drinks through a straw.
 - Use a blender or food processor to make smoothies or soups.
- **Choose foods and drinks that are high in calories and protein to help keep your weight the same.**
- **Avoid things that can burn or scrape your throat, such as:**
 - Hot foods and drinks
 - Spicy foods and spices like chili powder, clovers, curry, hot sauces and pepper

- Foods and juices that are high in acid, such as tomatoes and oranges
 - Sharp, crunchy foods such as crackers, chips, nuts, toast, raw vegetables or fruits like pineapples or apples
 - Tobacco products, such as cigarettes, pipes, cigars and chewing tobacco
 - Carbonated drinks like pop
 - Drinks that contain caffeine or alcohol
- **Talk with a dietitian.** They can give you ideas about what to eat and drink so you can maintain your weight.

Questions and concerns

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

Call your radiation doctor or nurse if you have:

- Trouble swallowing
- Throat pain
- Coughing while eating or drinking
- A feeling like you're choking or that food is stuck in your throat
- Weight loss
- Diarrhea – 3 or more loose bowel movements in 24 hours
- Sudden or bad skin changes that happen between your radiation treatment
- Questions or concerns



Call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Department (ED) if you have:

- Trouble controlling when you pee or poop
- New weakness or weakness that is getting worse

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.