

Understanding radiation therapy



Being prepared and understanding what radiation therapy is can help lessen some of the stress surrounding your treatment. Ask your oncologist, doctor or nurse any questions you may have before, during and after treatment. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of radiation therapy.

What is radiation therapy?

Radiation therapy uses x-rays to destroy or injure cancer cells so they cannot multiply. Radiation therapy can be used to treat the primary cancer or advanced cancer.

Sometimes radiation therapy is the only treatment used, other times it is used in combination with surgery and/or chemotherapy. It can also be used to reduce the size of the cancer and relieve pain, discomfort or other symptoms.

Why is radiation therapy given?

The aims of radiation therapy are to:

Cure – some cancers can be completely cured by radiation therapy alone, or when combined with other treatments.

Control – radiation therapy can control some cancers by making them smaller or stopping them from spreading.

Relief of symptoms – if curing the cancer is not possible, then radiation therapy may be used to reduce cancer symptoms and prolong a good quality of life.

When is radiation therapy used?

Radiation therapy may be the main treatment. It may also be used to assist another treatment. This is called adjuvant therapy.

Adjuvant radiation therapy may be used before your main treatment to make the cancer smaller. It may be used to shrink the cancer before surgery or after surgery to stop the growth of any remaining cancer cells. In some cases it is also used together with chemotherapy.

How is radiation therapy given?

A radiation oncologist is a specialist treating cancer with radiation therapy. He/she will arrange and supervise your radiation treatment. A radiation therapist works the radiation therapy machines under the direction of the radiation oncologist.

Radiation therapy is given from outside (external beam) or inside (brachytherapy) the body. In external beam radiation therapy, a machine directs radiation at the cancer and surrounding tissue. In internal radiation therapy, radioactive material is put in thin tubes and placed in your body near the cancer.

How long is a course of treatment?

Different people need different numbers of radiation therapy treatments. Some people need only one treatment, while others

will need radiation therapy five days a week for several weeks. If undergoing internal radiation therapy the implants may be left in place for a few minutes, one to six days or permanently.

Your treatment will depend on what sort of cancer you have, where it is, its size, your general health and other cancer treatments you may have had.

Does external radiation therapy hurt?

External radiation therapy won't hurt. You won't see or smell the radiation, however you may hear a buzzing sound when the machine is on. You will NOT be radioactive. It is safe to be in contact with other people, including pregnant women and children, when you are having treatment and afterwards.

Does internal radiation therapy hurt?

You may experience a little discomfort from the implant, however you should not have any severe pain or feel ill during implant therapy. While your radioactive implant is in place, it may send some radiation outside your body into the surrounding area. There will be limits on visitors while your implant is in place.

What are the possible side-effects?

Side-effects may vary a lot and will depend on which area of your body is being treated. Many of these side-effects can be managed and will gradually disappear once your treatment has finished. Possible side-effects include:

- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Dry, red or itchy skin
- Swelling
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea (feeling sick)
- Digestive problems
- Dry or sore throat or mouth
- Cough or shortness of breath.

Will radiation therapy affect my fertility?

Having radiation therapy in areas near your reproductive organs can affect your fertility or your ability to have children, temporarily or permanently. Discuss this possibility with your doctor or specialist.

Remember, if you have any concerns or questions, please contact your doctor.

Where can I get reliable information?

Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20

Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

Cancer Council Australia website

(with links to state and territory Cancer Councils)

www.cancer.org.au