

Radiation Therapy for Palliative Treatment at The Carlo Fidani Peel Regional Cancer Centre



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CREDIT VALLEY
THE CREDIT VALLEY HOSPITAL

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Introduction

Radiation therapy treats specific diseases, most commonly cancer. Radiation can shrink the tumor or slow its spread. It is also used to treat symptoms caused by disease. It may be used for pain relief and to improve a patient's quality of life. Living with recurring cancer can be emotionally stressful. Remember, each person's journey is unique and no two people will have the same experience. It is also important to remember that radiation is only one of several treatment options available. Medications or other treatments may be given along with radiation to help relieve symptoms. Your health care team will discuss the available options and decide upon the most appropriate course of treatment in consultation with you.

Patient Education and Information

When you visit the cancer centre you may have questions for your health care team. At any of your appointments, a member of the team is available to answer your questions. In addition, education will be provided before and during your radiation treatments. If you have questions, it is a good idea to write them down so that you will remember to ask them at your next appointment.

If you are on pain medication, it is very important to remember to bring the medication with you to all your appointments at the cancer centre.

The Peel Regional Cancer Centre offers a variety of programs and classes to assist you. Patient information materials are available in the patient resource centre located on Level I of the cancer centre. You can also access reliable information on our website; www.cvh.on.ca/cancer. Ask a member of your health care team for more information about any of these services.

Always bring your pain medication with you for your treatment planning appointment and your daily radiation treatments.



Treatment Planning

Treatment planning refers to the procedures required to prepare your treatment plan. This plan is used to deliver your daily treatments. The planning appointment takes approximately 30-60 minutes to complete. A CT scan, also called a CT simulator, may be used to aid in planning your radiation treatment.

When you arrive, a radiation therapist will explain the procedure to you and take a digital photo of you for your treatment record. If you are pregnant or suspect you might be, please immediately inform the radiation therapist.

You may be asked to change into a hospital gown before you are taken into the planning room. You will be asked to lie down in the specific position required for your treatment. A specialized mould may be made to help keep you in the same position for each treatment.

You must be able to maintain this position for 20-30 minutes without moving. Please tell the radiation therapist if you are too uncomfortable. It is important for you to be able to maintain this position everyday for treatment. Try to relax, lie still, and breathe normally. This will help the radiation therapist obtain the best possible measurements. Once the treatment area is determined, the radiation therapist will use a marker to put marks on your skin and will record some measurements. Small stickers will also be placed on your skin. The marks and stickers will be replaced with small, freckle-sized, permanent tattoos at the end of the session. These tattoos will allow the radiation therapists to set you up in the same position each day for your treatment.

Your radiation treatment plan will be created from the information obtained at this appointment.



Your Appointments

Following your planning session, an appointment for your first radiation treatment will be arranged with you. If your first appointment is not booked before you leave, the receptionist will call you to arrange an appointment. A period of time is required between your planning appointment and your first radiation treatment to prepare your treatment plan. This time varies depending on the complexity of the treatment plan.

Your treatment may be delivered in a single session, or you may have several treatments over multiple days or weeks. If you are unable to attend an appointment for any reason, please contact us at 905-813-4411. If you are unable to contact us, please have someone else contact us on your behalf.

Each day when you arrive for treatment, check in at the radiation therapy reception desk and present your health card. Have a seat in the waiting area until your name is called. If you would prefer not to have your name called out, please inform the reception area staff.

Sometimes radiation therapy machines require attention resulting in delays. When this occurs you may be at the cancer centre for a longer period of time than expected.

If you are coming with a volunteer driver and arrive early for your appointment, be prepared to wait until your scheduled time.



Radiation Treatment

Radiation does not hurt.

The radiation treatment appointment takes between 10-30 minutes. The majority of time is spent placing you in the correct position for treatment. The actual radiation is only on for a couple of minutes. During your treatment you will not feel anything. It is similar to having an x-ray. There is no smell, sight, taste, or feel associated with treatment. You may hear the machine making clicking or humming noises when it is turned on.

Radiation cannot be seen, smelled, felt or tasted. It is like having an x-ray.

In order for radiation to be effective, you must try to remain still throughout the treatment.

The radiation therapist leaves the room to deliver the treatment. He/she is able to see you on a camera and hear you on an intercom during the treatment.

The machine may rotate around you during the treatment. The radiation therapist is able to operate the machine from inside or outside the room. Once the treatment is complete, the machine will switch off automatically. It can also be switched off by the radiation therapists at any point during treatment, if the need arises. Although you may get accustomed to the sounds of the machine starting and stopping, please do not move until your therapist tells you that it is okay to do so.

Radiation does not make you radioactive.

It is important to note, there is no radiation left in your body following treatment. It is safe to be around your friends and family immediately after the treatment.



Pain Management

Radiation is often given to help relieve pain. Keep in mind, relief from pain may take some time. It is important to have a plan to help keep your pain under control. It is also important for you to know that living with cancer does not mean you need to live in pain. Talk to your health care team to understand the role you play in managing pain to achieve a better quality of life.

It is helpful if you can learn to describe your pain. For example:

- When did the pain begin?
- Where is the pain?
- What does the pain feel like?
- Have you had pain like this before?
- How long does it last?
- Does anything make it better or worse?
- Does taking the medication or other treatments relieve the pain?
- How would you rate your pain on a scale from 1-10 (with 10 being the worst pain)?

Ways you can help manage the pain:

- It is important to gently balance exercise and rest.
- Do not use ice packs, heating pads or any extreme temperatures on the skin in the treatment area.
- Try relaxation techniques such as music, meditation, and/or imagery. There are some audio relaxation files on our website if you'd like to practice in the privacy of your own home:
www.cvh.on.ca/cancer

Pain Medication:

- Keep a written list of your medications with you at all times.
- If you are taking routine pain medications, don't skip a dose.
- Keep breakthrough or "rescue" medication with you at all times.
- If you are running low on your pain medication, contact your doctor about getting a new prescription.
- If your medication is not helping your pain, or your pain begins to get worse, contact your health care team for advice.
- Don't stop taking your pain medication without consulting your doctor.

Pain flare:

This is a sudden increase in pain which can occur 24 to 48 hours after radiation treatment and can last a day or two. This is normally a mild to moderate increase in pain, and occurs in less than 1/2 of the patients treated for pain control. You will be given instructions on what to do should you experience a pain flare.



Side Effects of Treatment

Radiation treatment is used to destroy cancer cells. Radiation also affects normal cells, but the normal cells recover better and faster. Side effects of radiation are the result of short term damage to your normal cells. Side effects for patients receiving palliative radiation are usually mild.

Each individual has a unique experience with radiation treatment. The specific side effects depend on the area of the body being treated and the amount of radiation delivered. Your radiation oncologist, nurse, and therapist will discuss potential side effects with you. They will also discuss recommended strategies for side effect management with you as the need arises. Specific pamphlets are available to help you understand and manage the various side effects from treatment.

It is important for you to maintain your nutrition during treatment. If the side effects of treatment or the disease itself are making it difficult for you to maintain your nutrition, a dietitian consultation can be arranged. One of our dietitians can meet with you before or after your treatment appointment. If it is more convenient, you can speak to them by calling 905-813-1100, extension 5157 or 6120.

Almost all side effects you experience from treatment will go away within one to four weeks after the completion of treatment.

The side effects listed below are the most common, but will not be experienced by every individual. Use the information below as a starting point for discussion with a member of your health care team.

● **Fatigue or Tiredness**

This is a relatively common side effect for patients receiving palliative radiation.

Fatigue or tiredness is a temporary side effect of radiation treatment. It is important to understand that fatigue is not an indication of the progression or worsening of your disease. Your energy levels will likely begin to improve about two weeks after treatment is finished. The following suggestions may help with your fatigue:

- Talk with your health care team to learn ways to manage fatigue.
- Try to maintain your normal sleeping routine. Take short naps during the day only if/when you need them.
- Keep a record of how you are feeling each day and consider reducing the activities that make you feel tired.
- Plan your day so there are times you can rest.
- Plan activities that may distract you from your fatigue (e.g. listening to music or reading).
- Try some light exercise such as walking, but don't overdo it.

- Try to maintain a comfortable level of social activities. Do the things that matter most to you and make you happiest.
- Try to maintain a well balanced diet and drink lots of fluids.
- Accept help from friends or family members. Ask for help even if it isn't offered. Some people may be hesitant to offer their assistance for fear of offending you.
- Ask about support groups or counselling. These may help you learn how to effectively manage your fatigue and the emotional stress of treatment.

● Nausea

Depending on the area of the body being treated (e.g. the abdomen), you may experience nausea. This side effect is temporary and your radiation oncologist may prescribe medication to minimize it during your treatment. You may be asked to take this medication at a specific time before your treatment (i.e. 30-60 minutes before). It is important to follow this schedule to achieve the maximum benefit from the medication. Ask your oncologist or nurse if you are unsure about when to take your medication. Be sure to inform your health care team if the medication is not effective in managing your side effects. If nausea is interfering with your ability to eat or you would like additional nutrition information, a consultation with a dietitian can be arranged before or after your treatment appointment.

● Alopecia or Hair Loss

If you are having radiation therapy to your head, you will probably experience partial to complete loss of hair in the treatment area. This hair loss is usually temporary but, in some cases, it may be permanent. Your radiation oncologist, nurse or therapist can provide you with information about hair loss. Be sure to speak with a member of your health care team about ways to cope with the loss of hair, such as using a scarf or hair piece or by signing up for a free **Look Good Feel Better** session. You may want to consider visiting a hair salon that sells hair pieces before you lose your hair. They can help you choose something that is similar to your natural hair in style and colour. Or, you may prefer to be adventurous and try a new look.



● Cough and Shortness of Breath

If you are receiving treatment to the chest area you may develop a temporary dry cough. This side effect may occur in the first few days of treatment and may take a few weeks to subside.

Some patients may already be suffering from problems related to shortness of breath. In this case, radiation therapy to the chest may aggravate the pre-existing symptoms before there is a noticeable improvement. If this occurs it is generally mild. Your radiation oncologist may prescribe oxygen to help you breathe, medications to minimize the symptoms, or may suggest ways for you to reduce these symptoms at home. It could take several days to weeks for you to feel the maximum benefit of the radiation. If you experience worsening of your cough or shortness of breath, please immediately inform a member of your health care team.

● Esophagitis or Sore Throat

Esophagitis or sore throat is a mild side effect from palliative radiation. It may occur in patients who are having their lung or throat treated. Esophagitis can make it difficult to swallow and therefore it may be hard to maintain proper nutrition. Your radiation oncologist can provide you with medication(s) to help relieve the pain and make it easier for you to eat and drink. You may be instructed to take the medication prior to meals. Please follow the instructions to get the maximum benefit from the medication. If your sore throat is making it difficult to eat, a consultation with one of our dietitians can be arranged.



Weekly Review

Once a week while you are on treatment you will have an appointment with the radiation oncologist and/or the radiation nurse. This is known as weekly review.

It is important for you to attend this appointment so your progress can be monitored. This appointment is pre-scheduled along with your radiation treatment appointment. The day and time your radiation oncologist is available will be shown on your weekly appointment schedule.

If you need to see a doctor or nurse on a day other than your review day, please speak to your radiation therapist. Someone is always available to see you.

During your last full week of treatment, you will be provided with information about what to expect after your treatment has finished.

Follow Up

By your last appointment, your follow-up plan will be discussed with you. This may be an appointment at the oncology clinic, it may be follow up with the physician who referred you, or it may be elsewhere. The specific plan will be determined by your radiation oncologist. If you are unsure of your follow up plan by your last day of treatment, please ask for it before you leave the radiation therapy department.

If you have any questions or concerns once you have completed your treatment, or if you need additional support, please contact the radiation therapy department at 905-813-4411.



