

Treatment Information for Patients with Lower Gastrointestinal Cancer

What to Expect

This information will help prepare you and your caregiver for your treatment. You will receive external beam radiation therapy, a noninvasive treatment. However, in order for the beams of radiation to reach your tumor, they will travel through and affect other tissues, such as the bowel, bladder, and rectum, which can become irritated over the course of treatment.

Side Effects

Some people will develop side effects that usually occur within 1-3 weeks following the start of radiation therapy. The type of side effect, and how severe it may be, will depend on many factors, including the dose of radiation and number of treatments prescribed by your provider, and is very dependent on whether you are receiving chemotherapy as well with your radiation treatments. **Not everyone will experience all or any of these side effects.**

- Nausea is occasionally strong enough to cause vomiting and tends to be noticeable early if you experience it on treatment.
- Fatigue and decreased appetite with weight loss is common during treatment and generally becomes more noticeable the longer you are on treatment.
- More frequent bowel movements, sometimes with diarrhea or abdominal cramping, or a feeling of bloating and gassiness can be possible. This can also cause irritation of the anus or the skin around it.
- Urinary and bladder changes, including frequent urination, burning, and/or pain with urination.

Please discuss problems or concerns about side effects or any part of your treatment with your doctor, nurse, or therapist. You will have a weekly visit with your doctor to assess how you are doing, but if something comes up at any point, you can alert your team any time.

Symptom Management and On-Treatment Care

The following are some recommendations to help manage common symptoms on treatment. Your team will discuss these with you, as well as possible next steps if these do not address your symptoms.

Skin

- Protect your skin from sun exposure by using SPF of 30 or more year-round.
- You should use a moisturizer recommended by your provider to protect your skin, but do not use moisturizers on the treated area within 4 hours before your radiation treatment.
- Wear soft, loose-fitting clothing to prevent skin irritation.
- Often, the area around the anus can become irritated directly from the radiation or from frequent stooling; sitz baths (also known as a hip bath, a lukewarm bath with baking soda or Epsom salts) can be soothing, and protective creams such as A+D ointment or Triple Paste can be applied at night.
- Moist flushable wipes can often be used instead of or in addition to toilet paper to reduce discomfort with wiping after stooling; a perineal irrigation bottle (squirt bottle) can also be used to minimize wiping.

Bowel

- Your provider will assess the frequency of your stooling; it is often recommended to limit stooling to three times a day or less, and over-the-counter medications, such as Imodium, may help you control the frequency of your bowel movements.
- Certain foods may cause increased stooling, such as raw vegetable or milk products; your provider may recommend a dietitian assessment, but keeping a food diary that will help you identify “offending” foods can also be helpful.
- Patients who experience gassiness or bloating may benefit from over-the-counter medications such as Gas-X (simethicone) or Beano.
- If you are having stooling more than three times a day, or uncontrollable watery diarrhea, alert your team and make sure to stay hydrated with fluids containing electrolytes such as Pedialyte.

Bladder

- Certain foods and beverages are more likely to increase urinary frequency or discomfort on treatment. These include carbonated or acidic, caffeinated, and alcoholic beverages. If you develop symptoms of urinary urgency or irritation, avoiding these may help.
- Additionally, an over-the-counter medication, Azo, may help with urinary irritation, although it will change the color of your urine.

Supplements

- Vitamins, fish oil, and herbal supplements are discouraged during treatments.
- Over-the-counter multivitamins such as One-A-Day are acceptable.

Caution

Contact your nurse or doctor immediately if you experience:

- Inability to eat your usual diet due to mouth sores from chemotherapy
- Red, swollen, peeling, or tender areas of skin in the treatment area
- Temperature of 100.5°F or higher
- Chills or shakes

Call 911 or go immediately to the Emergency Department for:

- Signs of a bowel obstruction, including the inability to pass stool or eat, abdominal pain, and uncontrollable vomiting
- Signs of a chemotherapy reaction, such as rash over a large area of your body (often not the area receiving radiation) or difficulty breathing
- High fevers above 102°F

Contact Us

During or after office hours, call the radiation oncology clinic line at 214-645-8525. We will connect you with your team during office hours or with on-call staff after office hours.