

Radiation Treatment Information for Patients with Head and Neck Cancers

This information will help prepare you and your caregiver for your treatment.

What to Expect

You will receive external beam radiation therapy, a noninvasive treatment. A custom positioning mask may be required to ensure correct positioning during each treatment. Your therapist will make your mask by placing and shaping a very warm and wet plastic sheet of open mesh over your face. You will be able to see and breathe while the mesh is over your face.

You may need to see a number of specialists during your treatment.

- Dentist – To check your teeth and perform any necessary work before radiation treatment begins.
- Physician – To discuss possible placement of a feeding tube to ensure you receive enough calories during treatment.
- Dietitian – To discuss nutritional needs, including recommended foods and liquids high in nutrition that are easy to swallow.

A therapist will call you with your treatment schedule after the plan has been customized for you and approved by your physician.

Follow-Up Appointments

A follow-up visit with your radiation oncologist will be scheduled within 12 weeks after your last treatment.

Side Effects

Side effects may occur 1 – 3 weeks following the start of treatment, but will slowly get better once treatment is finished. The type of side effects and how severe depend on many factors.

- Fatigue is very common during treatment.
- Mouth changes in the treated area, including sore mouth and throat, dry mouth, thick phlegm, alteration of taste, and pain when swallowing.
- Skin changes that look like a bad sunburn.
- Changes inside your nose, including dryness, stuffiness, and/or occasional minor nosebleeds.
- Depending on the area treated, ear pain may develop from swelling caused by radiation.

Please discuss problems or concerns about side effects or any part of your treatment with your doctor, nurse, or therapist.

Care

Bathe and shower daily using warm water and a mild unscented soap such as Dove[®], Purpose[®], or baby soap.

- **Do not** use a washcloth, scrubbing cloth, or brush when bathing.

- When drying off, pat skin dry with a soft towel or allow to air dry.

Aquaphor should be applied to the treatment area daily and as needed.

- If your skin is itchy, **do not** scratch it. Instead, use Aquaphor/Aloe vera to aid in relief.
- **Do not** use moisturizers within 4 hours **before** your radiation treatment.

To minimize skin irritation, wear loose-fitting cotton underwear and clothing.

Protect your skin from sun exposure. Avoid tanning or burning your skin during and after treatment.

Avoid extreme temperature to the area being treated, including:

- Hot tubs
- Water bottles
- Heating pads
- Ice packs

Do not use products with alcohol, including alcohol pads, on your skin in the area being treated.

Swimming is permitted **only if**:

- You **do not** have any skin reactions during your treatment
- Pool is chlorinated

Rinse off chlorine right after getting out of pool.

A cool-air humidifier during the day and at night may provide some relief of nose, mouth, and throat dryness. Saline nose spray can help dryness and stuffiness in the nose.

Managing Mouth and Throat Soreness

Mouth and throat irritation can make it challenging to swallow and maintain proper nutrition. In some cases, the insertion of a feeding tube may be necessary to help you do so. Your treatment team will recommend and/or prescribe oral solutions to treat mouth sores, which can be especially helpful before meals and at bedtime.

Eat soft foods that are easy to chew and swallow.

We have on-staff dietitians to help you, so please tell your nurse if you'd like to meet with them.

Mouth and Throat Dryness

- Eat and drink frequently to maintain moisture in your mouth.
- Drink water throughout the day.
- Use a cool-air humidifier.

Mouth Care

- Take extra care of your teeth and mouth while you are receiving radiation treatments.
- Schedule a checkup with your dentist (or a dental oncology specialist) before your radiation treatment planning starts.
- A toothbrush with soft bristles and a mild toothpaste, such as Biotene™, is preferred.
- For any soreness or tenderness in your mouth or teeth, use a soft sponge or cloth to clean.
- Gently floss your teeth daily with unwaxed dental floss.
- For partial or full dentures, consider keeping them in only while you are eating.

- Do not use mouthwash that has alcohol.
- Use fluoride trays daily.

Salt and Soda Oral Rinse

- Dissolve ½ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon baking soda in 32 ounces of lukewarm water, which will help to dissolve the salt and soda.
- Directions for use:
- Thoroughly swish the solution in your mouth, then spit. You may also gargle with the mixture if your throat is sore. Rinse six to eight times daily.
- A helpful hint is to keep a quart of rinse in the bathroom and rinse each time you use the restroom.

Caution

- Avoid shaving and do not apply pre- or after-shave lotions to or near the treatment area.
- Do not use makeup on the treated area.
- Do not smoke, chew tobacco, or drink alcohol.
- Citrus, spicy, salty, rough, and dry foods can increase mouth and throat pain.

Contact your nurse or doctor immediately for:

- Inability to eat your usual diet
- Sores in your mouth or on your lips
- Red, swollen, or tender areas of skin
- Temperature of 100.5° F or higher
- Chills

Call 911 for:

- Unusual bleeding
- Shortness of breath

Contact Us

During office hours, call your radiation oncologist. After-hours, call 214-645-8525.