

Palliative Radiotherapy

Answers to common questions

This handout explains when palliative radiotherapy is used and what to expect when having this treatment.

What is palliative radiotherapy?

*Radiotherapy uses high energy X-rays to treat cancer. It is also called **radiation therapy**.*

*Palliative therapies relieve symptoms, but they do not try to cure the condition that is causing the symptoms. The goal of **palliative radiotherapy** is to help reduce or control symptoms caused by the cancer.*

Palliative radiotherapy may not be right for all types of cancers. Talk with your cancer care provider if you have questions.



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How can palliative radiotherapy help me?

It may be used to:

- Relieve pain.
- Treat spinal cord and nerve compression. This may help with weakness, numbness, pain, or loss of urine or bowel control.
- Treat headaches, vision changes, and other symptoms of cancer involving the brain.
- Shrink a tumor that is blocking blood vessels to lessen swelling.
- Shrink a tumor that is blocking an airway to improve breathing.
- Stop or reduce bleeding from a tumor.

How long does palliative radiotherapy take?

How long a single treatment takes depends on how many areas are being treated. If needed, up to 3 areas of your body can be treated at one time.

The overall length of treatment depends on your specific needs. Some people have only 1 treatment, while others may have up to 10 treatments.

When are treatments done?

At University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC) Radiation Oncology, treatments are usually done once a day. They are usually done on weekdays.

What are next steps?

Before treatment begins, you will meet with a *radiation oncologist*, a doctor with special training in radiation therapy. If your radiation oncologist believes that palliative radiotherapy will be helpful for you, we will set up a planning visit called a *CT simulation*.

CT Simulation

For the simulation:

- A special CT (*computed tomography*) scanner is used to take images of the areas of your body that will be treated.
- You may need to swallow or receive an injection of *contrast* (X-ray dye). Contrast looks white on the CT images. This makes it easier to see the part of your body we are treating.
- We may place permanent marks (tattoos) on your skin to help make sure that we treat exactly the same place every time.
- We may make special molds or masks that we will use to help keep your body in the exact same position for each treatment.

How will the radiation affect me?

- Radiation treatments are painless. You will not see or feel the radiation.
- You do not need to follow *contact precautions* while you are being treated.
- Your body may react to the radiation. This can cause side effects. Your radiation oncologist will tell you more about these side effects and how to treat them:
 - Feeling more tired
 - Minor skin redness or irritation
 - Hair loss in the treatment area

How soon will it work?

If you are receiving radiation to ease pain:

- Your pain may get worse for a short time before it gets better. This is called a *pain flare*.
- It may take days to a few weeks to work. How quickly your pain improves may depend on the type of cancer you have and your specific symptoms. Many patients may feel improvement in their pain within 4 weeks of their radiation treatment.

How do I prepare for treatment?

- If you are already taking pain or nausea medicines:
 - Tell your radiation oncologist that pain or nausea may be a problem for you.
 - Bring your pain or nausea medicines with you to each treatment.
 - Be aware that if you increase your doses of pain or nausea medicine, you may become *constipated* (have hard stool). Our nursing staff can give you tips on how to prevent and treat constipation.
- Wear comfortable clothing. You may need to change from your own clothes into a hospital gown. Tell our staff if you need help to change your clothes.
- Drink plenty of fluids, and eat a balanced diet. This will help you feel your best. Ask to talk with our dietitian if you have not been able to eat or drink as you normally would.
- Cancer treatment can be stressful. Tell us if you have concerns about your mood, your family, transportation, or other issues that make it hard for you to come to treatment. We will do our best to help.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., call UWMC Radiation Oncology at 206.598.4100. Press 1 after the call goes through.

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.598.6190 and ask for the Radiation Oncology resident on call to be paged.