

About Your Radiation Treatment

Answers to common questions

This handout answers some questions you may have during your radiation treatment. If you have other questions or concerns, please talk with your care provider. You can also talk with the radiation team during your weekly clinic visit, also called “doctor day.”

When will I start my treatments?

Most patients start their treatments 7 to 10 business days after their Planning CT/Simulation visit. If needed, we may start treatment sooner than that. But it can take 2 to 4 weeks to plan a treatment that is more complex. Most patients find out their start date at their Planning CT/Simulation visit.

May I choose the time of day for my treatments?

When we are setting up your treatment visits, please tell the Simulation Staff what start time works best for your schedule. We will do our best to plan your visits for a time that works well for you.

If the start time you want is already filled, it is possible that it may open up later. If so, we may be able to move your start time. However, some types of treatment must be done at specific times of day and cannot be changed.

Sometimes emergency treatments or procedures last longer than their scheduled time, which may delay your start time. We will let you know if this happens. Thank you for being flexible if there are delays or if we ask you to change your start time.

May I choose my start date?

You can help decide when your treatment will start, unless your doctor tells us that it is very important to start your treatment on a certain date. Please tell us if you are planning a vacation or important event that could interrupt your treatment.



Linear Accelerator used to deliver radiation treatments

For best health outcomes, please limit any breaks in your treatment to weekends, holidays, and emergencies. Talk with your doctor if you want to take a break that has not been planned. If your doctor says it is safe for you, it may be possible to take a short break in your treatment.

How does radiation work?

Radiation works in 2 ways to kill cancer cells:

- It works with the oxygen in your body to create *free radicals* inside and outside your cells. These free radicals damage the cancer cells.
- Radiation also damages the *DNA* in the cancer cells. This DNA contains genetic information that is needed to create new cancer cells.

Healthy, normal cells are usually able to fix both of these types of damage, but cancer cells cannot.

How do you know the radiation is going to the right place in my body?

We always make sure your body is in the right position before we give you your radiation treatment. Before each treatment, we will:

- Help place you in your treatment position.
- Use your *immobilization device*, as well as your tattoos and tracings along the laser lines, to position your body.
- Use a low-energy scan called a *cone beam CT (CBCT) scan* or films to make sure your position is correct. Many treatments need films only once a week to make sure the radiation is going to the right place.

Will these scans show if the radiation is working?

CBCT scans and films are used only to help check your body position. The images from these scans do not show the details of body tissues very clearly. It is very rare that we can see the cancer or the results of radiation treatment with these types of imaging.

How do we know the radiation is working?

The radiation starts working after your first treatment. If you have symptoms caused by the cancer, they may get worse after treatment because your cells are inflamed. Your symptoms may also improve because the cancer is shrinking. Both of these changes in your symptoms usually mean the radiation has started to work.

When do we find out if the radiation treatment was successful?

This depends on the type of radiation you received and where the cancer is in your body. Most times, we do not know how well the radiation worked until the follow-up visit, usually 6 weeks to 3 months after treatment is finished.

Why do we have to wait so long?

It can take 6 weeks to 3 months after your last radiation treatment for the cancer cells to die and for your body to resolve any inflammation.

- One goal of radiation is to damage the DNA in the cancer cells so that the cells die when they are trying to create new cells. Even after you are done with your treatment sessions, the damaged cancer cells keep trying to create new cells at different rates. This means they also die at different rates.
- We also wait to check on the results of radiation because you will have some inflammation while your body is cleaning up the dead cancer cells. This inflammation can look like disease on a scan.

How long do side effects last?

There is no way to know ahead of time how long you will feel the side effects of radiation treatment. But most people feel improvement within 2 to 6 weeks after they finish treatment, if they keep giving their body the tools it needs to heal.

You can help your body recover by:

- Eating plenty of protein
- Drinking plenty of fluids
- Staying active
- Reducing stress
- Taking care of your skin and teeth

How tired will I be?

Each person is unique. Most patients will get a little tired and some may be very fatigued. And everyone recovers from the fatigue at different rates. It is hard to predict how long it will be until you are feeling “normal.”

To help you through the fatigue, eat nutritious foods, do some physical activity every day, and find ways to reduce stress.

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 Cancer Center 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.