



Radiation to the Abdomen

What you should know

This handout explains what to expect after having radiation treatments to the abdomen.



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Your Radiation Treatment

Radiation therapy is a local treatment that focuses on killing cancer cells and reducing the size of tumors. Both normal cells and tumor cells within the treated area can be damaged during radiation. Normal cells, such as skin cells and mucous membranes, can repair themselves when treatment is over. Damaged tumor cells cannot repair themselves.

You will have radiation treatments 5 days a week, Monday through Friday, until the desired dose is reached. It is important to come for all your treatments.

General Side Effects

The most common side effects of radiation to the abdomen are:

- Nausea, upset stomach
- Diarrhea
- Stomach and swallowing discomfort
- Fatigue
- Difficulty with urination
- Skin reactions

Side effects vary from patient to patient and depend on which area of your abdomen is being treated. Most side effects will go away 2 to 4 weeks after your treatment is finished.

Please tell your doctor or nurse about your symptoms. We will try to figure out why they are happening and will help you find ways to prevent or lessen them.

What to Avoid

- High-fiber foods such as legumes, broccoli, corn, onions, popcorn, nuts, and whole-grain products
- Spicy foods
- Gas-producing foods like carbonated beverages or cabbage
- Fried and greasy foods, and other high-fat foods
- Milk or milk products, if they irritate your bowels

There are medicines to control diarrhea. Please talk with your doctor or nurse before using them.

Stomach and Swallowing Discomfort

Your stomach may feel full if the *mucous membranes* (inner lining) of your *esophagus* are irritated by radiation. Your esophagus is the tube that carries food from your mouth to your stomach. Swallowing may be painful. You may feel like you have a lump in your throat. Your doctor can prescribe medicines to ease these symptoms, if needed.

What You Can Do

These tips might also help:

- Choose soft, smooth, moist foods. Cold foods may feel better than warm or hot foods. Avoid foods and drinks that are spicy or that contain acid, such as hot sauce, orange juice, and others.
- Carry a water bottle with you and sip cool liquids throughout the day. Fluids will help soothe irritation.
- Eating healthy foods and staying hydrated is important. Your doctor or dietitian may advise nutritional supplements. Our clinic dietitian can help you find foods that you like.

Fatigue

During radiation therapy your body uses a lot of energy. Stress related to your illness, daily trips for treatment, and the effects of radiation on normal cells can all make you more fatigued.

Fatigue varies with each person. It often begins in the first 2 weeks of treatment, and it can increase as you receive more radiation.

What you can do

When you start treatment, weekend breaks usually provide enough time to recover. If needed, take naps, go to bed earlier, or sleep in later.

- **Minimize chafing.** Choose clothing that is loose and soft. Avoid fabrics that irritate your skin, tight waistbands, and clothing that fits tightly in any part of the treatment area.
- **Watch skin folds.** Watch areas that fold over on each other, such as under-stomach pouches or breast tissue, or in groin areas. The skin in these areas can be warm and moist, which makes it more easily irritated by radiation.
- **Please use only the skin care products your provider gives you for reducing skin irritation.** Follow your provider's directions for using these. Using other products may cause skin irritation to get worse.

Side Effects by Treatment Area

Side effects may be different in different treatment areas. Your doctor will talk with you about side effects that might happen depending on where you are receiving radiation. They will also talk with you about possible effects on nearby organs.

The table below lists side effects by their specific treatment area.

Treatment Area	Nearby Organs	Possible Side Effects
Upper Abdomen	Liver, gallbladder, stomach, kidneys, large intestine, small intestine, pancreas, and spleen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nausea • Stomach upset • Diarrhea
Lower Abdomen	Small intestine, large intestine, ureters (tubes that carry urine from your kidneys to your bladder), appendix, and urinary bladder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diarrhea or loose bowel movements • Frequent, urgent, or painful urination (<i>dysuria</i>)

Questions?

Your questions are important. If you have questions or concerns, the best way to contact your doctor is to send them a message through MyChart. Please include a photo if relevant.

You may also call UWMC Radiation Oncology:

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.