

Thoracic Radiation Treatment Side Effects

Patients who have radiation treatment to the thoracic area may have side effects during and after treatment.

During treatment:

- Skin changes
- Esophagitis – Inflammation of the esophagus
- Fatigue

After treatment ends:

- Pneumonitis – Inflammation of the lungs
- Effects on the heart

Skin Changes

Skin changes are usually minimal and can be treated with Aquaphor® or an ointment of your choice. If skin changes worsen, your care team may suggest other products.

Esophagitis

Radiation-induced esophagitis is inflammation of the esophagus. It is a temporary side effect of radiation treatment. Esophagitis is common in people who receive radiation to the chest area for cancer of the esophagus as well as other cancers.

Esophagitis feels like an internal sunburn and usually develops 10 to 14 days after beginning radiation. The person might feel a sharp, burning pain or food getting stuck in the chest when swallowing.

Patients who are also on chemotherapy may have other symptoms. Your care team will discuss this with you.

Treatment with Medicines

Your doctor may prescribe these medicines to treat esophagitis:

- Magic Mouth Wash
- Sulcralfate – An oral medicine that forms a coating over ulcers, protecting the area from further injury
- Omeprazole, pantoprazole and esomeprazole
- Opioid pain medicine
- Pain patch

Diet Changes to Manage Esophagitis

Follow the guidelines below to help you take in enough nutrition and fluids during treatment.

- Drink at least 2 quarts or 2 liters of fluids per day to prevent dehydration and dry mouth. Water is best. Limit the number of drinks containing caffeine that you take in. These include coffee, tea and sodas.
- Use liquid nutritional supplements, such as Boost®, Ensure® and Carnation Instant Breakfast® drink.
- Drink liquids through a straw to help push the food beyond painful areas.
- Eat soft, moist foods that are easy to swallow.
- Cut foods into small bites to reduce the amount of chewing.
- Puree or liquefy foods with a blender or food processor by adding liquids such as milk, gravy or sauces.
- Avoid very hot or very cold foods. You may find it easier to eat foods or drink liquids at room temperature.
- Avoid drinking alcohol.

Fatigue

You may feel more tired than usual. Fatigue is very common during radiation treatment. It may get worse as your treatment progresses and can last 2 to 3 weeks or longer after treatment ends. Some patients find it helpful to do light exercise, such as walking. Do not overexert yourself and do not begin new exercise programs.

Pneumonitis

Pneumonitis is inflammation of the lungs caused by radiation treatment to the chest area. It most commonly develops 3 to 6 months after treatment is over, but it can happen as early as 2 weeks after treatment. Chronic pneumonitis can lead to permanent scarring of the lungs, called pulmonary fibrosis. This condition is chronic and can become worse over time.

Signs and symptoms may include:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Fever
- Night sweats

Heart Problems

Radiation therapy can increase your risk of developing diseases of the heart. This may develop 6 months to years after treatment is completed. Your radiation doctor will discuss if you need to see and a cardiologist for additional testing and monitoring. It is also a good idea to maintain a healthy diet, exercise regularly and to have routine blood pressure checks and screening for lipid problems and diabetes.

If any symptoms get worse or do not go away, report them to your radiation care team without waiting for your next scheduled appointment. After you finish treatment, we will continue to monitor you for less common side effects.