



Patient Education for

Department of Radiation Oncology

Radiation to the Brain

Your doctor suggests radiation to all or part of your brain. The purpose of this sheet is to make you aware of possible side effects. It will also give you ideas on how to reduce and manage these side effects.

Possible Side Effects

1. Skin Changes:

After about two weeks, hair loss will occur in the area being treated. This may or may not be permanent and depends on the dose of radiation you receive. Regrowth of hair usually begins within three to six months after you complete radiation. Ask your doctor if you are concerned. Use only an electric razor if you shave within the treated area.

The effects on the skin occur only in the treated area. This includes areas of the skin where the radiation enters and exits your body (i.e. both front and back surfaces). If you are not sure of the location of your treated areas, ask your radiation therapists. After a week or two of treatments, your skin will start to become dry. Your skin may darken or turn pink or red. It may itch or feel tender. We suggest that you take care of your skin from the first day of radiation, before these changes are noticed.

Treat your skin very gently. Wash the skin with warm (not too hot or cold) water. Do not scrub the skin. For instance, use your hand rather than a washcloth and pat dry. Avoid irritants. We suggest not using soap or shampoo on the treated area. If you do use soap or shampoo, choose a mild one which does not contain perfumes or deodorants, which can irritate radiated skin. Avoid friction to treated skin. Do not use tape in the treated area. Avoid temperature extremes. Do not place a heating pad, ice pack or hot water bottle on the treated skin.

There are many ways to treat radiation skin reactions. Since radiation therapy causes skin dryness, it makes sense to apply a moisturizing cream, lotion, gel or oil to radiated skin. (Use of skin care products is not practical until the hair falls out.) The specific product and the frequency of using it are according to your individual skin condition and preference. It is best to apply lotion after your bath or shower. As with soaps, our advice would be to avoid products with perfume or deodorant (in other words, choose products appropriate for sensitive skin). If a product stings, stop using it. If you have questions or need help with a skin problem, check with your nurse or doctor. If your skin becomes tender or itchy, your doctor may prescribe a steroid cream, or you may try 1% hydrocortisone cream.

It is best to avoid exposing the treated skin to the sun while you are having radiation treatment. Shield the skin from the sun (i.e., wear a wide-brimmed hat). Skin exposed to radiation treatment will always be more sensitive to the sun. Use a sunscreen (PABA-free) that is at least SPF 15 when the treated area is exposed to the sun. Avoid using tanning booths.

Sometimes radiation dries the ear canal. If you sense that your ears are plugged, mention it to your doctor or nurse.

2. Steroid use:

You may be taking steroids, such as Decadron (dexamethasone) or Prednisone, prescribed by your doctor. These drugs (taken by mouth) reduce swelling of the brain and should be taken as instructed. Please tell all doctors in your care if you are taking any of these drugs. These drugs should not be stopped without a doctor's OK because stopping too fast can result in problems. Steroids need to be tapered, not stopped suddenly. These drugs may cause upset stomach. You should take an antacid such as Pepcid or Zantac or another antacid prescribed by your doctor daily while on steroid drugs.

3. Headache, dizziness, and nausea and/or vomiting:

Treatment rarely causes dizziness (sometimes called vertigo). Headache, nausea and/or vomiting may occur during your treatment. These problems may be caused by your disease or medicine. If this is the case, you should be checked by your nurse or doctor to see if you need a change in steroid dose, anti-nausea drugs, diet changes, or other measures.

4. Visual sensations:

Some people report seeing blue or white lights when the treatment machine is turned on. This is a harmless effect of radiation on the optic nerves, and has no ill effect.

5. Fatigue:

Feeling tired is common. It is important to take good care of yourself while you are having treatment. Many people find that mild exercise, such as walking, can improve their energy level. However, the level of activity should depend on what you feel like doing. If fatigue develops, extra rest may be needed.

Note: Symptoms may go on after your last treatment. If you have any problems, please let your therapist, nurse, or doctor know.

Information in this document should be used in consultation with your health care provider.
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