Long-Term Side Effects from Head and Neck Radiation

Side effects are problems caused by radiation therapy. Many of these problems get better after your radiation treatments are done, but some side effects may last longer or may not go away at all. At your first visit and during your follow-up visits, your doctor will talk with you about any side effects that you may have from treatment.

Common Long-Term Side Effects

Fatigue

- Fatigue can last from 6 weeks to 12 months after your last treatment. Some people may always feel fatigue and may not have as much energy as they did before treatment.
- If your fatigue gets worse, call your doctor. Your doctor may want to do some tests to see if there is another reason for your fatigue.

Dry Mouth and Thick Saliva

- Your dry mouth and thick saliva usually start to get better 3 to 4 weeks after the end of treatment. Most of the improvement with a dry mouth will happen in the first 6 months after treatment, but it may continue to get better over time.
- Keep doing your mouth care that you did during treatment. This will help keep your mouth moist and thin out your saliva.
- Keep a water bottle with you at all times to help moisten your mouth. Drink plenty of water when you eat food.
- Your doctor may prescribe a medicine to help with your dry mouth.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

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Taste Changes
- Problems with taste usually start to improve about a month after treatment ends. Most of the improvement with your sense of taste will happen in the first 4 to 6 months after treatments are done.
- Most people who get radiation for head and neck cancer do not have their sense of taste return to the way it was before treatment. Some taste changes will probably be permanent.
- Your taste may be duller than it was before treatment and may fade away after a few bites.
- To maintain a healthy diet, limit your use of sugar or salt on foods to make them taste better.

Swallowing Problems
- Mouth and throat sores caused by treatment are usually healed within a few months after treatment.
- You may have a hard time swallowing because your mouth is so dry. Keep a water bottle with you at all times to help moisten your mouth. Drink plenty of water when you eat food.
- Tell your doctor if swallowing suddenly gets worse or if it feels like food gets stuck in your throat when you eat. Sometimes the esophagus (food tube) gets smaller after radiation treatments and may need to be stretched.

Skin Changes
- Skin changes to the area that was treated will slowly get better within a few months after your last treatment. The skin may be darker than it was before. If your radiation treatment caused the skin to blister, you may always have some lighter spots on these areas.
- Your skin may feel different in the area that was treated.
- You will need to protect your skin from the sun for the rest of your life. The skin in the treated area will always be sensitive and you will have a higher risk for skin cancer.
- Do not spend long periods of time in the sun. Cover your skin when you are in the sun. Wear a big hat with a wide brim and use a sunscreen of SPF-30 or higher on the area that was treated.
Neck Changes

- Fibrosis (scarring) is a common side effect. You may have less movement in your neck after radiation. Your neck may feel harder in the area that was treated. If you had both surgery and radiation, you are at a higher risk for this problem. Your doctor can give you stretching and massage exercises and may ask you to see a physical therapist.

- Lymphedema (lim-fe-dee`-ma) is a build-up of fluid in the tissue under the chin. This swelling can happen if the lymph nodes in your neck have been removed or changed by radiation. Lymphedema often gets better within 1 to 2 years after treatment ends. You doctor may ask you to see a physical therapist to help manage this problem.

- If you need head and neck surgery in the future, your healing will be slower because of the changes in your neck from radiation.

- Every time you have surgery, it is very important to let your surgery doctor and anesthesiologist know that you had radiation in the head and neck area.

Mouth Care

- Radiation to your head and neck puts you at a higher risk for having problems with your teeth and gums (dry mouth, gum disease and cavities).

- Brush and floss your teeth after every meal and use fluoride trays at night.

- See your dentist every 3 months for a checkup. Your dentist will check your mouth, teeth and jaw for any changes.

- You need to wait 6 to 12 months after your treatment is done before you have new dentures made.

Jaw Problems

- Trismus is a problem that causes muscle spasms or tightening of your jaw. This condition will make it harder for you to open your jaw. Your doctor can give you jaw stretching exercises to help with this problem.

- Radiation can cause bone loss in the jaw and problems with healing after dental work or surgery. It is important to have your dentist call your radiation oncologist **before** you have any dental work or gum surgery. Your dentist may need more information about your radiation treatment to know the best way to care for your mouth and teeth.
Thyroid

- The thyroid is a gland located in the lower front part of the neck. Your thyroid makes and stores hormones. Radiation treatment may cause the thyroid to stop working. This may happen years after your treatment has ended.
- If the thyroid gland stops working, you may feel more tired, cold, gain weight or lose your hair.
- Your doctor will do a blood test, 1 or 2 times a year, after your radiation treatment has ended to check your thyroid. If your thyroid stops working, your doctor will give you a prescription for medicine to take each day.

Other Long-Term Side Effects

Radiation to the head and neck can cause other long-term side effects such as:

- Hearing problems
- Spinal cord and nerve damage (problems with how your arms and hands work)
- Blood vessels changes (changes that put you at a higher risk for stroke)
- Secondary cancers (radiation can cause a new cancer to develop many years after you have finished treatment. This does not happen very often, but it is important to keep your follow-up appointments after treatment has ended.)