Radiation Therapy for Head and Neck Cancer

What is Radiation Therapy?

Radiation Therapy (also called radiotherapy) is a type of cancer treatment that uses high doses of radiation to kill cancer cells and stop them from spreading. The type of radiation therapy most often used to treat head and neck cancers is called external beam radiation therapy. A machine outside your body will aim a beam of radiation to the area where your cancer is located. The total amount of radiation you will get is spread out over several weeks.

Most head and neck cancers are treated with radiation therapy every day, Monday through Friday, except for holidays. The number of treatments you will get depends on your type of head and neck cancer. Most patients will have 30 to 35 treatments. The number of treatments may be lower for patients who have radiation therapy to help reduce pain and other symptoms.

How long does radiation therapy take to work?

Radiation therapy attacks the cancer cells right away and the cells will keep dying for weeks and months after your treatment is done.

Will I be radioactive?

No, external beam radiation therapy will not make you radioactive. You are safe to be around other people.

How will the treatment feel?

Radiation therapy does not hurt. The treatment is like having an x-ray or a CT scan done. The machine is large and may be noisy, but does not touch you.

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

What are the side effects from radiation therapy to the head and neck?

- Radiation therapy may damage healthy cells near the tumor which may cause side effects. Common side effects include:
  - Fatigue
  - Dry Mouth
  - Taste Changes
  - Sore mouth and throat
  - Pain and difficulty swallowing
  - Skin changes
  - Hair loss in the treatment area

For more information, ask for the patient education handout: Short-Term Side Effects from Head and Neck Radiation.

- Side effects can happen 1 to 2 weeks after treatment starts and are different for each person. It is hard to know how long or how severe side effects may be for you.
- Side effects often get worse during treatment and for 1 to 2 weeks after your radiation therapy is done.
- It can take several weeks to months, or longer, for your side effects to improve.

What will happen at my first appointment?

Your first appointment with your Radiation Oncologist (a doctor who specializes in using radiation therapy) will last 1 to 2 hours. During this visit, your doctor will talk with you about your cancer diagnosis, what treatment is best for you and what to expect during radiation therapy. You will not have a treatment at your first appointment.

Do I need to see a dentist before starting radiation therapy?

You will need to see a dentist before starting treatment. The dentist will check your teeth for any problems and will do dental work if needed. This will help make sure your mouth is healthy before starting radiation therapy.
What will happen when I come for treatment planning?

- You will be scheduled for a treatment planning session which includes a CT Simulation. This procedure uses a CT scanner to location of the area that needs to be treated.

- During the simulation a face mask will be made to fit your face and neck. The mask is made of moldable mesh plastic. It has many air holes so you can see and breathe through the mask. You will wear the mask for each treatment. The mask will be attached to the table when you lie down for your treatment. The mask helps to keep your head and shoulders from moving, so that your treatment is given to the same exact location every time.

- If you are a woman of child bearing age, you will have a pregnancy test done before your treatment starts.

- After this appointment, it will take 1 to 2 weeks for your Radiation Oncologist to complete your radiation treatment plan.

When will I have my treatments?

Radiation treatments are given in the Radiation Oncology department. When you have your planning session, you will be given a choice of treatment times. You will have your treatment at the same time each day. Each treatment visit will take about 1 hour.

How often will I meet with my doctor?

You will see your Radiation Oncologist at least one time each week during your treatment to talk about any concerns or problems. You may also call 614-293-8415 to talk with one of the doctors at any time, day or night.

What happens after my treatment is done?

After you complete your treatment, it is important to keep your follow-up appointments with your Radiation Oncologist. At these check-ups, you will be asked about any side effects that you may have from treatment and may have blood or imaging tests done.
What else should I know about radiation treatment?

- The most important thing that you can do to help improve your recovery from radiation therapy is to **quit smoking**. Ask your doctor or nurse for information about programs that can help you quit.

- Do not miss any of your appointments. Each missed treatment lowers the chance for your radiation therapy to be successful.

- It is important to exercise and stay as active as possible. Plan for rest periods before and after activities.

- Drink plenty of non-caffeinated fluids and eat a well-balanced diet.

- **Do not get pregnant** while you are getting radiation therapy and for about 6 to 12 months after your treatment has ended. This could put a baby at risk for a genetic problem.

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**For more information on Radiation Therapy, we encourage you to visit our video library at** [http://cancer.osu.edu/patientedvideos](http://cancer.osu.edu/patientedvideos).