

Radiation Therapy for Prostate Cancer: What you need to know

What is Radiation Therapy?

Radiation treatment uses high energy X-rays to kill cancer cells. Radiation damages the cancer cells so they cannot grow or divide. Normal cells affected by the radiation can repair themselves and heal. The goal of radiation therapy is to kill the cancer cells while limiting the damage to healthy normal cells.

Why external radiation?

Radiation therapy can be given as the primary treatment. It is also used after prostate surgery (a prostatectomy) to kill any cancer cells that could remain after surgery.

Facts about radiation treatments

- Radiation is done as an outpatient
- Treatments are given 5 days a week, Monday through Friday
- Treatments are not usually done on weekends or holidays
- Most patients have 6 to 8 weeks of treatment
- Set up and treatments can take 20-40 minutes
- Radiation is delivered by a team of licensed Radiation Therapists (RTT)
- Radiation treatments are not painful
- Radiation treatments will not make you radioactive

Planning your treatment – Simulation

Before starting radiation, you will be scheduled for a “simulation” or mapping procedure. During simulation your doctor maps out the exact location of your tumor and the area to be treated.

Some patients have dye put into their bladder or rectum. Scans are then taken of the prostate area. The dye helps your doctor to see the prostate more clearly during these scans.

Other patients have three small gold markers inserted into their prostate prior to having their planning done. These also help your doctor see the position of your prostate.

Your appointment for your simulation will take about an hour. The simulation takes about 30 minutes and you will also meet with your doctor. We encourage you to ask any questions you may have.

- At the end of this appointment you will be given the date and time you start your treatments.
- You will be given a scan card and instructions on how to check yourself in every day.
- You will meet with a Radiation Nurse before or after your planning session. The nurse will give you additional information such as where you will go to have your treatment and answer any questions you may have about treatment and managing any side effects.

What to expect during your treatments

Preparation:

- Bring the scan card you were given during the simulation.
- Eat and drink as usual. No fasting is needed.
- Drink about 16 ounces of water 20 minutes before each treatment. This lifts your bladder off the prostate area. See the Full Bladder instruction sheet.

Weekly checkups

Once a week you will meet with your radiation oncologist and radiation nurse. This visit is scheduled on the same day each week. Please plan to stay an extra 30 minutes on that day.

These visits are to check on side effects and give you time to ask questions. If you have questions or concerns at any other time, please ask to speak to your nurse.

Side effects

The goal of radiation therapy is to destroy cancer cells, but radiation therapy can also injure or destroy normal cells. This can cause some side effects. Most side effects occur in or around the area being treated. Most side effects are temporary but some may be permanent.

Short-term side effects:

The following side effects usually start 2 to 3 weeks after treatment begins.

These side effects can be treated and usually start to get better within 3 to 4 weeks after your treatment ends.

- Urinating more often than usual (urinary frequency)
- Sudden feeling of having to urinate urgently (urinary urgency)
- Burning or discomfort while urinating (dysuria)
- Difficulty starting urination, stream of urine is slow, or stream stops and starts
- Bowel changes – more frequent bowel movements or softer bowel movements than usual
- Bleeding – occasionally a small amount blood is seen during or after urination or bowel movements

Tell your nurse or doctor if you experience any of these side effects. They will suggest ways to decrease the side effects or prescribe medicines to help.

Long-term side effects:

Long-term side effects may take months or years to develop and can be permanent.

- Ongoing urinary changes
- Ongoing bowel changes
- Occasional bleeding with urination or bowel movements
- Decrease or loss of erections

Sexuality

During radiation treatment you can have intercourse if you and your partner feel physically and emotionally ready. You might experience some discomfort with ejaculation. This is normal, and you are not causing any harm. You might notice some blood in the semen.

We realize that some people may be embarrassed to talk about sexual problems or concerns. We understand and want to help you. We will always respect your privacy.

Fertility

Talk with your radiation doctor or nurse about reliable methods of birth control. Receiving radiation therapy in the area of your testes can reduce both the number and function of your sperm but it is still possible to get a woman pregnant.

Radiation therapy may affect your future fertility. Talk with your doctor or nurse about how to preserve your fertility. If you think you might want to father children in the future, you will need to bank your sperm before treatment begins.

Follow up

You will see your radiation oncologist 3 months after treatments end or sooner if needed. This appointment is set up during your last week of treatment.

You will get a lab slip to get a PSA (Prostate Specific Antigen) blood test sometime before the appointment.

After this appointment, you will have checkups and PSA blood tests every 6 months, either with your radiation oncologist, urologist or primary care doctor.