

BEFORE RADIOTHERAPY

Practical Preparation for the Weeks Ahead

Preparing for radiotherapy can feel more manageable when you know what to expect, what to ask, and what to have in place at home.

You may already know how many sessions are planned, have a list of possible side effects, or have been shown the machine and the position you will be treated in.

Practical questions often come later: What side effects are most relevant to my treatment? What may build up over the weeks? What should I have ready at home? What should I report to the team?

This guide focuses on those practical questions.

RADIOTHERAPY IS NOT ONE EXPERIENCE

Radiotherapy can be used for many different cancers, in different parts of the body, for different reasons and over very different schedules. The effects can vary depending on the area being treated, the dose and schedule, other treatments you are receiving, and your own body.

Someone else's radiotherapy experience is not a prediction of yours.

Your radiotherapy team is the right place to ask what effects are most relevant to your treatment and what they want you to report.

BEFORE YOUR FIRST SESSION

You do not need to prepare for every possible side effect. Prepare for the treatment you are actually having.

Questions worth asking your team:

- What side effects are most likely with the area I am having treated?
- When do those effects usually begin, and can they build over the course of treatment?
- Are there skin-care, washing, clothing, eating, drinking or activity instructions specific to my treatment?
- Is there anything you want me to avoid on or near the treatment area?
- What can I do at home if common side effects begin?
- Who do I contact between appointments if something changes?
- What symptoms do you want me to report promptly?
- Are there effects that may continue or appear after the final session?

Write the answers down. Treatment weeks can become repetitive, and it is easy to forget what was said at the beginning.

MAKE HOME A LITTLE EASIER BEFORE YOU NEED IT

Most of the useful preparation is ordinary.

Think about transport, meals, work, childcare, shopping, rest and who could help if your energy changes. If your team expects eating, bowel, bladder, swallowing, skin or other difficulties because of the area being treated, ask what practical preparation they recommend before those problems appear.

Before using creams, dressings, supplements or other products during radiotherapy, ask your treatment team what is appropriate for the area being treated and for your specific treatment plan.

SIDE EFFECTS CAN BUILD

One of the difficult things about radiotherapy is that you may feel reasonably well at the beginning and assume that is how the whole course will feel.

For some people, effects accumulate as treatment continues. Fatigue may increase. Skin or tissue in the treated area may become uncomfortable. Depending on where treatment is directed, eating, swallowing, bowel habits, bladder symptoms or other functions may change.

That does not mean all of these things will happen to you.

It means it is worth noticing your own pattern rather than comparing yourself with the person in the next chair or somebody else's story online.

A SIMPLE DAILY CHECK-IN

You do not need a complicated symptom diary. A few notes can be enough:

Energy today:

Eating and drinking:

Sleep:

Pain or discomfort:

Skin or treatment-area changes:

Bowel or bladder changes, if relevant:

Anything new or noticeably worse:

Something I want to tell the team:

SPEAK UP BEFORE SOMETHING BECOMES YOUR NEW NORMAL

It can be easy to assume that expected side effects should simply be tolerated until the next appointment.

But your team cannot respond to something they do not know is happening.

Tell them when an effect is new, worsening, worrying you, or interfering with eating, drinking, sleeping, moving, using the toilet or managing ordinary life. Follow the urgent-contact instructions your treatment centre gives you if you become acutely unwell or develop a symptom they have told you requires prompt assessment.

Reporting side effects gives your team useful information about how treatment is affecting you and whether additional support may be appropriate.

THE LAST SESSION MAY NOT BE THE END OF THE EFFECTS

Some radiotherapy effects can continue or develop after the final treatment session.

Ask before your final sessions what may continue to build or take time to settle, what recovery may look like for your particular treatment, and who you should contact after the daily appointments stop.

Knowing what to expect afterwards can make it easier to recognise what is expected and when to contact the team.

ONE THING TO REMEMBER

You do not need to prepare for every possible side effect before treatment begins.

Ask what is most relevant to your treatment, make practical arrangements where useful, keep track of changes, and contact your team when something is new, worsening or worrying.

The aim is not to predict the whole course. It is to help you feel better prepared for the parts you can plan for.

Between Appointments™ provides lived-experience support and practical orientation. It does not replace medical care or provide individual medical advice. Always follow the instructions and urgent-contact guidance provided by your radiotherapy team.