

This instruction is intended for our patients who are in a care relationship.

Satakunta Hospital District | Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia | Hospital District of Southwest Finland

Radiation therapy for mouth and neck cancer

Radiation therapy is a central form of treatment for cancer in the head and neck area. Radiation therapy uses radiation that affects especially cells that are dividing and therefore destroys cancer cells well. Radiation therapy can be given to tumors in the head and neck area solely or combined with surgery. If given after surgery, radiation therapy is used to kill small cancer cells that may still be left in the operated area.

Treatment is always planned individually. Chemotherapy may also be given during radiation therapy to enhance treatment's effectiveness.

During planning for radiation therapy, a mask covering face and shoulders is made. The mask is needed to ensure treatment position. For treatment planning, a CT scan is taken with the mask on. It is also often necessary to take an MRI scan or a PET-CT scan. Sometimes a custom-made mouthpiece is needed to ensure the position of mouth and tongue. Radiation therapy is given once a day for six to seven weeks. One treatment takes approximately 15 minutes. Treatment is executed in co-operation of doctors, physicists and radiographers.

You can receive chemotherapy for one day a week during radiation therapy. Chemotherapy lasts for around 5 hours. You will receive radiation therapy after chemotherapy in the afternoon.

Quit smoking

Quitting smoking is an important part of cancer treatments. Smoking may reduce effectiveness of radiation therapy and prolong side effects. Smoking also increases the risk of a new cancer. You can get help to quit smoking from doctor and nurses.

Alcohol

It is not recommended to drink alcohol during cancer treatments.

Side effects of radiation therapy

Radiation therapy affects also normal cells so it may cause topical side effects. Side effects are usually temporary. Always tell a nurse/radiographer if you notice any symptoms. You will get a prescription from your doctor for medicine needed to treat the side effects.

Side effects are individual, and they depend on the size of the treatment area in the mouth and throat or larynx. Side effects appear usually around two weeks after starting treatment and may

continue even after radiation therapy has ended. Acute symptoms pass in a few weeks after treatment has ended. Side effects are rarely severe.

Common side effects are:

- dry mouth
- changes to taste and smell
- problems with eating and swallowing, caused by pain in mouth and throat
- hoarse voice
- thrush or other infections
- nausea (especially if you receive chemotherapy during radiation therapy)
- loss of appetite and weight loss
- skin reactions on the treated area
- tiredness
- pain

Dry mouth

Radiation therapy to the mouth causes dryness to the mouth and viscous saliva. Mouth care and cleansing e.g., rinsing with saline solution, are important during radiation therapy. It prevents dry mouth and eases eating.

Taste changes

Your sense of taste may change and worsen, even disappear, during radiation therapy. Sour and bitter may taste stronger than before. Salty and sweet taste weaker than before. For example, beef, cheeses or coffee may taste bad. Thrush may also cause bad taste in mouth.

After radiation therapy, your taste will slowly start to recover. This may take months, even a year.

Problems with swallowing

Radiation therapy to the head and neck area affects the mucous membranes of mouth and throat. Swallowing may get difficult, and secretion of mucus can increase because of this.

You can ease swallowing by:

- eating calmly and small meals often
- eating soft and lukewarm food e.g., mashed soups or having sauce with solid foods
- avoiding hard and coarse foods
- drinking lukewarm chamomile tea
- taking regularly pain medicine that your doctor may have prescribed

Weight loss

You may have problems with eating for example due to dry mouth, taste changes, problems with swallowing and nausea. A feeding tube, so called PEG-tube, may be inserted to your

stomach through belly. Nurses will give you advise on supplements and liquid feeds if your nutrition is inadequate and your weight drops.

Supplements can be bought from the pharmacy without prescription. They contain lots of energy and nutrients.

You will meet with a nutritionist as a part of your care path.

Nausea

Nausea can be caused by many different reasons. Chemotherapy, that you possibly receive in addition to radiation therapy, causes nausea. Reason to nausea can also be psychological; arriving at the hospital can already make you nauseous.

You can prevent nausea by:

- Eating calmly and small meals often
- Drinking between meals e.g., carbonated drinks, rather than during eating
- Eating cold foods that don't have strong smells
- Avoiding cooking and spending time around food smells
- Eating in a well-ventilated area
- Resting after eating
- Taking regularly pain medicine that your doctor may have prescribed
- Dripping liquid feeds slowly

Skincare

- Shower the neck area with lukewarm water without soap and rubbing. Showering is important because clean skin withstands radiation's strain better.
- Moisturize irritated and dry skin with unscented, water-soluble lotion that you can buy from the pharmacy without prescription. Apply lotion after treatment. Skin should be clean and dry during treatment.

Fatigue and taking care of yourself

Worrying about the future and daily treatments can cause fatigue. Side effects can also lower your abilities with daily chores, hobbies or work. You can get sick leave for the time of the treatment and recovery. During treatment, you should rest and obey instructions for care, medication and nutrition. Light exercise e.g., outdoor activities, is recommended.

Pain

During radiation you won't feel pain. As a side effect from radiation therapy, problems with swallowing and sores in the mouth may occur, which cause pain. Pain can be treated with medicine.

You can get help also for

- Sexuality
- Mental well-being
- Payment and travel allowance

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