

Radiation Side Effects: Female Pelvis

What side effects can I expect from radiation therapy?

Side effects from radiation therapy vary from person to person and depend on the part of the body being treated, the dose of radiation given, the size of the treatment area and if you are receiving chemotherapy prior, during or after radiation. Side effects may happen with radiation therapy because the high doses of radiation used to kill cancer cells can also damage healthy cells in the treatment area. Some people have more intense side effects whereas others have none at all. Your team will discuss the specific side effects they anticipate you to experience.

What skin changes may occur?

Skin changes can occur in the area being treated with radiation. Make sure to keep the area being treated clean and dry prior to your radiation treatments. Do not apply any moisturizers, ointments, deodorants, powders, or cosmetics to this area. You may continue to bathe or shower as you have been however we recommend using a mild soap, rinse and pat dry. Skin changes from radiation usually don't occur until a few weeks into your radiation treatments. Please discuss skin care as well as recommended skin care products with your medical team.

Will I experience fatigue?

Fatigue is a very common side effect from radiation therapy and you will probably experience it at some point during your radiation treatments. Typically, patients will feel most fatigued toward the end of radiation. Fatigue includes feelings of tiredness, exhaustion, and/or decreased amount of energy to complete tasks. Make sure you are getting adequate amount of sleep at night aiming for 8 hours per night. Maintain a balanced, nutritious diet and incorporate some sort of exercise which often helps to decrease fatigue. Pace

activities or group them together and take rest periods when needed or an earlier bedtime. Allow others to help you with tasks or errands. Fatigue usually continues well after radiation has completed, approximately 6-8 weeks, and sometimes even longer for some.

Will nausea and vomiting occur?

Nausea and vomiting can result from radiation treatments to the abdomen, small intestine, colon, or brain. It may be intermittent, persistent or associated with radiation treatments. For example, you may notice nausea a few hours after treatment each day. It can continue after radiation is completed for approximately 2 weeks. You may find it helpful to eat frequent, small meals or snacks. Eat foods that are bland and easily digested (ie bananas, rice, applesauce, toast or crackers, clear broths, yogurt). Drink plenty of liquids especially if you are vomiting (Gatorade®, ginger ale or 7-up®, broth). If symptoms persist, notify your physician or nurse about medication to relieve nausea and vomiting.

Will I experience diarrhea?

Diarrhea, loose, or soft stools can occur as a result of radiation treatments to the abdomen, pelvis, or stomach. People develop diarrhea because radiation harms the healthy cells in the large and small bowels. Usually change in bowel movements occur around 2 weeks into radiation and continue until approximately 2-3 weeks after radiation treatments are completed. It is important to stay well hydrated when you are experiencing diarrhea. Make sure you are consuming 8-12 glasses of fluids daily (for example water, sports drinks, fruit juices). Avoid high fiber foods such as raw fruits and vegetables, whole wheat breads and cereals as well as fried or greasy foods, milk and dairy products and spicy foods. Eat foods that are easy on the stomach for example foods that are low in fiber, fat, and lactose. Eat foods that are bland and easily digested (ie bananas, rice, applesauce, toast or crackers, clear broths, yogurt). Notify your physician or nurse if diarrhea is not controlled by diet to discuss use of medications to help control and manage diarrhea.

Will I experience bladder irritation?

Bladder irritation can occur as a result of radiation treatments to the low pelvis. Radiation that affects the bladder/urinary tract can cause the following symptoms: burning with urination, urinary urgency and frequency, difficulties initiating urinary stream, and the inability to completely empty your bladder. These symptoms typically start approximately 2-3 weeks into your radiation treatments and continue a few weeks after completing radiation. Drink plenty of fluids; approximately 6 to 8 cups each day. Drink enough fluids so that your urine is clear to light yellow in color. Avoid fluids that are irritating to the bladder including caffeinated beverages (teas, coffee) and alcoholic beverages. Please discuss these changes with your physician and nurse so they can help you manage these side effects.

Can radiation therapy affect sexuality and fertility?

Radiation to the pelvis for men and women may cause scar tissue, hormone changes, loss of interest in or ability to have sex. Other symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety or depression can also affect interest in having sex. It is very important to have open communication with your partner about your feelings and concerns. Generally, it is ok for you to engage in sexual activity while you are going through radiation treatments. Please ask your nurse or physician if you have specific questions or concerns. Sexuality and fertility counseling/support is available. Please let us know if you are interested.

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by the University of Michigan Health System (UMHS) for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by UMHS and for which UMHS does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan.

Reviewers: Molly Brummond, RN, James Hayman MD, Jill James RN, Victor Hola RN, Dawn Johnson

Patient Education by [University of Michigan Health System](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#). Last Revised 11/2016