



Patient Information

WHAT TO EXPECT WHILE RECEIVING RADIATION THERAPY TO THE HEAD AND NECK AREA

Oncology

Vitalité Zone: 1B 4 5 6

Facility: Dr. Léon-Richard Oncology Centre

In this document, you will find information on:

- The main steps to prepare for radiation therapy;
- Where to find more information about skin care during radiation therapy;
- Where to find more information about mouth care during radiation therapy;
- The most common side effects and how to better manage them;
- The end of treatments.

Your team of healthcare professionals includes a radiation oncologist, radiation therapy nurses, radiation therapists, a dietitian, and a speech-language pathologist. Members of your team will support you and your family throughout your treatment.

Feel free to ask questions when you come for your daily treatments.

The radiation therapists and nurses are there to answer you and they will speak to your radiation oncologist if they feel it is necessary.

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Planning your radiation therapy

Planning is an important step to ensure that you receive the best possible treatment. You will not receive any radiation therapy on the day of your planning appointment.

The first step in planning is making a mask. This mask will cover your head and maybe your neck and shoulders. It will help you to stay in the right position and will be used for each treatment.

If you are uncomfortable in closed spaces (e.g., claustrophobia), please tell the staff before this appointment. The staff will help you.

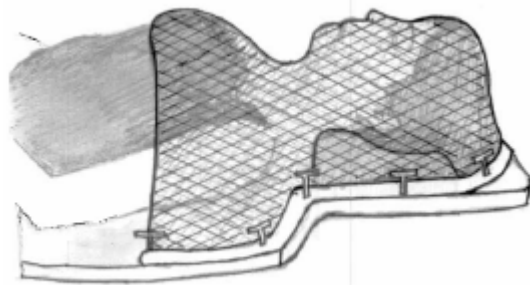


Figure 1. Patient with mask

Radiation therapists and the radiation oncologist use a CT simulator to identify the area of treatment and plan your radiation therapy.

- If you have a beard and/or moustache, you will have to shave. **This will have to be done before this appointment.**
- You must not move.
- You can breathe normally during the procedure.

The radiation therapists may draw marks on your skin. The ink may stain your clothes.

You must keep the marks on your skin, if any, and wash the area gently in order to not wash them off.

Allow one hour for this appointment.

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When will I get the date for the planning appointment and radiation therapy treatments?

You can expect a phone call a few days or a few weeks after your appointment with your radiation oncologist. The staff will give you the date and time of the planning appointment (mask and CT simulator).

When you come to that appointment, the staff will give you the date and time of your first radiation therapy appointment.

Where do I go for my planning and radiation therapy appointments?

You will have to register at the reception desk on level 0 of the Oncology Centre for **all** your appointments. Patients are asked to arrive at least 15 minutes before their appointments. Plan **extra** time, if needed, to park your car.

What will happen during radiation therapy?

After placing the mask, the radiation therapists will check the measurements from your CT simulation scan. They will take X-rays to ensure that you are in the correct position for treatment. They will then start the radiation treatment.

External radiation therapy is painless. You will not see or feel the rays.

How long is the treatment?

You should plan to be at the Oncology Centre for 45 minutes to 1 hour every day. Your treatment will last about 30 minutes. Part of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position for treatment.

General instructions

From the beginning of treatments, please ensure that you follow these instructions:

- Do not smoke or chew tobacco.
- Do not drink alcohol.
- Follow mouth care instructions.
- Follow skin care instructions.
- Eat normally until symptoms appear, if any.
- Inform your care team as soon as you experience side effects.

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The remainder of this document includes a list of the main side effects that you could experience **during** radiation therapy. Although side effects cannot always be prevented, the advice provided will help you to better manage them. However, it occasionally requires hospitalization.

What skin changes can I expect?

You may have skin changes in the treatment area. This is a normal side effect and it will get better after radiation therapy.

To know how to care for your skin, please see the pamphlet:

SKIN CARE DURING EXTERNAL RADIATION THERAPY

What can I do to reduce side effects to my skin?

- Use an electric razor to shave. Do **not** use after-shave lotion.
- Every day, apply a water-based, fragrance-free moisturizing cream to the skin in the area being treated (e.g., Glaxal Base[®], Lubriderm[®]).
- Do not use make-up or cosmetics on the treated area.
- Do not wear clothing that rubs your neck (e.g., scarf, turtleneck).
- Do not expose the treated area directly to sunlight or cold. Try to keep it covered with clothing.
- During the summer, wear a broad-brimmed hat to protect your head and neck from the sunlight.

Will I have pain in my mouth?

Radiation therapy causes changes inside the mouth.

What you may feel:

- Pain;
- Irritation;
- Swelling;
- Dryness;
- Infection.

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To know how to care for your mouth, please see the pamphlet:

MOUTH CARE

Will I have a dry mouth?

If your salivary glands are in the area being treated, you could notice that you have less saliva and that it is thicker.

What you may feel:

- Your mouth could be dry and sticky.
- You could have trouble swallowing.
- In some cases, the amount of saliva increases a little after treatments, but dry mouth may be permanent.

If you have a dry mouth

- Maintain good hydration. Drink plenty of water or other fluids every day. This may help to make your saliva less thick.
- Chew **sugarless** gum.
- There are saliva substitutes that moisten your mouth and provide relief from dry mouth (e.g., Biotène® products, Mouth Kote®).
- Keep the air humid at home. A cool mist humidifier in your bedroom may help at night.

Will the taste of food change?

If the salivary glands and tongue are in the treated area, the taste of food could change. Some foods taste better than others. Try different foods. Changes in taste may improve 6-12 months after completion of treatments. Some changes may be permanent.

Will I have a sore throat or trouble swallowing?

Radiation to the neck may cause irritation of the throat and esophagus (the tube that food passes through when you swallow).

What you may feel:

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- Pain on swallowing
- Difficulty swallowing.
- Secretions in your throat, occasionally with blood.

If you have trouble eating or drinking, it is important to inform your care team. Your team will be able to:

- ✓ Suggest changes in food and fluids;
- ✓ Arrange a visit with the speech-language pathologist;
- ✓ Contact your doctor and ask him or her to prescribe pain medications if needed.

You will meet with a dietitian. Your appointments will be in your radiation therapy schedule.

What you could do to **eat** enough food during your treatments:

- If necessary, eat soft food. Use gravies and cream soups to moisten your food.
- Eat your food warm (not hot) to prevent irritation.
- Eat several small meals during the day instead of three larger meals.
- Follow the advice of the dietitian and speech-language pathologist.
- Do the swallowing exercises recommended by the speech-language pathologist.
- Buy foods that are easy to prepare.
- Bring a snack for your appointments in case of unexpected delays and you would be hungry.
- Do moderate exercise and get some fresh air; this may help stimulate your appetite.
- Take your prescribed pain medication.
- Use the mouthwashes as directed to help you eat comfortably.
- Use meal supplements (e.g., Ensure®, Boost®) if you cannot eat enough solid food.

These measures will help improve your diet temporarily during this difficult period of time. It is occasionally necessary to have a feeding tube (tube to eat).

- If you have a feeding tube, follow the advice of your dietitian and doctor to have an adequate food intake.

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It is sometimes difficult to drink enough fluids during treatments. Some signs may be an indication that you need to drink more fluids (dizziness, tiredness or dark urine). The following are examples of fluids: water, juice, milk, soup, ice cream, decaffeinated coffee/tea, meal supplements (e.g. Ensure[®], Boost[®]), ice pops.

What you could do to **drink** enough fluids during your treatments:

- Do the swallowing exercises recommended by the speech-language pathologist.
- Always have a water bottle with you. Take small sips often.
- Use your feeding tube, if any, to drink fluids.

Will I note changes to my lips, nose and sinuses?

Tissues inside your nose, sinuses and lips are very sensitive and thin.

What you could do if your lips, nose or sinuses are irritated:

- Use a water-based lubricant (e.g., Toothette[®] E-Z[®], Surgilube[®]).
- Apply saline compresses to your lips.
- Put saline into your nostrils. You may use the following products: hydraSense[®], NasaMist[®] or a Neti Pot. Do the application over the sink. Lean your head forward to let the saline flow in the sink.
- **Never force the saline in if there is resistance.**
- Keep the air humid at home. A cool mist humidifier in your bedroom may help at night.

Will I lose my hair (beard)?

Hair loss may occur in the treated area. Often, hair grows back some time after completion of treatments. In some cases, it may remain thin or not grow again.

Will my voice change?

Swelling of the throat and vocal folds as well as dryness may affect your voice.

What you could do if you experience changes in your voice:

- Rest your voice as much as possible.

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- Keep the air humid at home. A cool mist humidifier in your bedroom may help at night.

Will I be more tired than usual during radiation therapy?

You may feel tired during radiation therapy. Fatigue is a common side effect. It varies from one person to another, but it often starts at the beginning and gradually gets worse over the course of treatment. Continue doing your usual activities if you feel well enough to do so.

Here is some advice if you are feeling very tired:

- Pace yourself, especially with activities that make you feel tired.
- Ask for help with activities that are hard to manage.
- Pick a relaxing activity or hobby that you are able to do.
- Walk for 30 minutes, 4 to 5 times a week.
- Keep a regular sleep routine and rest as you need to during the day.
- Limit naps to 45 minutes.

Will I note changes in my bowel movements?

If you note changes in your bowel movements, it is important to inform the staff.

Changes in diet and the side effects of some pain medications may cause constipation. If you suffer from constipation, you may have to take a medication.

You may also note some changes if you have a feeding tube.

The side effects described in this document are the most common ones. It is possible that you will have other side effects that are not listed above. Sometimes the tumour and the treatments can cause very similar symptoms.

Talk to your care team if you have any other symptoms.

The end of treatments

The staff will inform you of the date and time of your follow-up appointment with your medical specialist (radiation oncologist or ear, nose and throat specialist).

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Some of your side effects will persist after your final treatment. They could even get worse before they start to get better. This is normal. Continue to follow the instructions received from your health care team until you feel better.

Once you are finished with your treatments, feel free to call the Oncology Centre at **506-862-4005** if you have any questions or concerns.