



Patient information

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING PELVIC RADIATION THERAPY (Lower digestive cancers)

Oncology

☐ Vitalité Zone: ☒ 1B ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6

Facility: Dr. Léon-Richard Oncology Centre

This document includes information on:

- The main steps in preparing for radiation therapy;
- Other sources of information about skin care during radiation therapy;
- The most common side effects and advice to help you manage them;
- Completion of treatments.

Your team of healthcare professionals includes a radiation oncologist, radiation therapy nurses, radiation therapists and a dietitian. They will guide and 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 your questions and will discuss with your radiation oncologist if they feel it is necessary.

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WHAT TO EXPECT DURING PELVIC RADIATION THERAPY

Planning your radiation therapy

Your radiation oncologist recommended that you undergo radiation therapy. Before it begins, some planning is necessary. This is an important step to ensure that this is the best possible treatment for you. You will not receive any radiation therapy on the day of your planning appointment. It will be necessary for you to have a comfortably full bladder for the appointment.

When you arrive, the staff will:

- Ask you to go empty your bladder (urinate) and then drink 500 mL of water in 10 minutes;
- You will then need to wait 1 hour to allow your bladder to become full.

Once preparation is completed, the staff will perform a CT simulation to identify the area of treatment.

- You must not move.
- You can breathe normally during the procedure.

Radiation therapists will make marks or “tattoos” on your skin. They will give you specific instructions on how to care for them. **They might ask you to keep the marks on your skin and wash the area gently in order not to wash them off.**

Plan to be at the Oncology Centre for approximately 2 hours for this appointment.

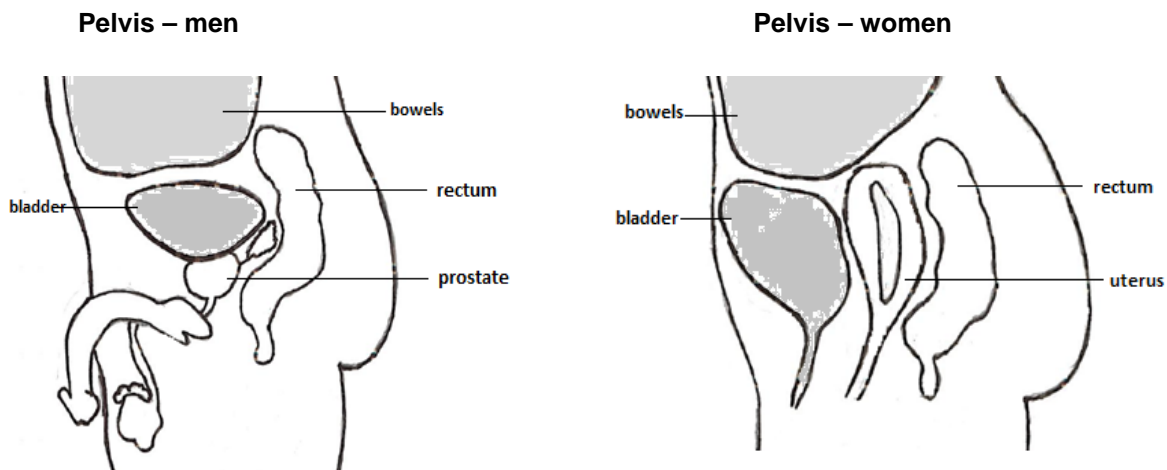
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Why is it important for you to have a full bladder?

Having a full bladder is important because it helps reduce some side effects.

The goal of radiation therapy is to aim the radiation treatment right at the tumour and surrounding area while minimizing the radiation dose received by other organs (e.g. bladder and bowel).

When the bladder is full, it pushes the bowel upward, which reduces the amount of radiation it receives.



Drawings: Courtesy of Denise Roy, Radiation Therapist, Dr. Léon-Richard Oncology Centre

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During radiation therapy

For **ALL** your treatments, it will be necessary for you to have a comfortably full bladder. Your bladder should be as full as for the planning step (CT simulation).

Preparation – comfortably FULL bladder

Follow these steps **one hour** before each treatment:

- First, empty your bladder;
- Right after, drink 500 mL (2 cups*) of water in 10 minutes;
- Do not urinate after drinking. Your bladder will become full;
- You can empty your bladder (urinate) **after your treatment**.

Also, it is important to stay hydrated and to drink water throughout the day.

Drink at least 5 to 7 glasses of water every day (one glass is equal to 8 oz. or 1 cup).

Continue until the end of your radiation therapy treatments.

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When will you know the date of your radiation therapy planning appointment and the date of your first treatment?

You can expect a phone call a few days after your appointment with your radiation oncologist. You will be given the date and time of your planning appointment (CT simulation). When you come for that appointment, the staff will give you the date and time of your first radiation therapy appointment.

Where should you go for your radiation therapy planning and treatment appointments?

You will have to report to the reception desk on level 0 of the Oncology Centre for **all** your appointments. We ask that you arrive at least 15 minutes before your appointments. Plan **extra** time, if needed, to park your car.

What will happen during radiation therapy?

Once you are comfortably installed on the treatment table, the radiation therapists will check the measurements from your CT simulation. They will take X-rays to ensure that you are in the correct position for treatment. They will then start the radiation therapy treatment.

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

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How long is the treatment?

A radiation therapy treatment only lasts a few minutes, but you will need to remain lying down on the treatment table for approximately 15 minutes.

You should plan to be at the Oncology Centre for 30 to 45 minutes every day.

Skin changes

- Your skin could change around the treatment area. This is a normal side effect and it will get better after radiation therapy.
- Your skin could become irritated 2 to 3 weeks after starting radiation therapy.
- Your skin will begin to heal 3 to 4 weeks after radiation therapy is over.
- In women, skin changes might involve vaginal irritation, which is sometimes accompanied by itching or a burning sensation. Continue to wash yourself and maintain good hygiene. Keep the irritated area clean and dry.
- Taking a sitz bath can help you take better care of your skin (refer to explanations on pages 8 and 9).

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To learn more about skin care, please read the pamphlet:

SKIN CARE DURING EXTERNAL RADIATION THERAPY

Avoid applying moisturizing cream or vaseline in the buttock fold, groin or on the external genital organs.

What is a sitz bath?

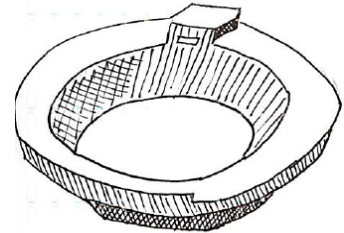
A sitz bath consists in soaking your perineal region or buttocks in warm water. It is used to:

- Cleanse your skin;
- Relieve pain;
- Reduce the risk of infection;
- Increase blood flow.

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How to take a sitz bath.

1. Buy a sitz bath at the pharmacy.

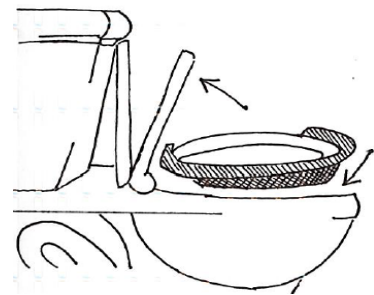


2. Wash the sitz bath basin prior to use.

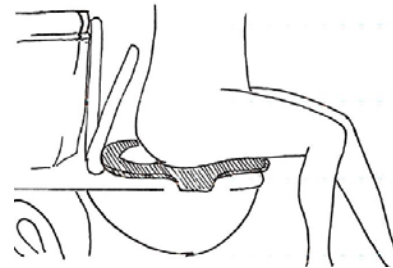
3. Fill the basin 2/3 of the way with warm water.

4. Do not add bath oil or other products to the water.

5. Lift the toilet cover and seat, and place the basin on the toilet.



6. Sit down and let your perineal region / buttocks soak in the water for 10 minutes.



7. When you are finished, dry your skin with a clean soft towel.

8. Take a sitz bath up to 4 times a day.

9. Make sure you **clean and rinse the** basin **thoroughly** after each use.

Drawings: Courtesy of Marie-Gil Savoie-Malenfant, Radiation Therapist, Dr. Léon-Richard Oncology Centre

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Fatigue during radiation therapy

- You may feel tired during radiation therapy.
- Fatigue is a common side effect.
- This varies with each person but often begins early in the treatment and increases gradually during treatment.
- The situation improves 1 to 2 months after radiation therapy is over, but it can sometimes last several months.
- Continue doing your usual activities if you feel well enough to do so.

Advice in case you are feeling very tired

- Pace yourself.
- Ask for help with activities that are hard to manage.
- Find 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.
- Eat a balanced diet and drink plenty of water.
- Have healthy, balanced, easy to prepare meals on hand.
- Eat meals at regular times throughout the day and snacks if you need them.

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Cramps and diarrhea

- You may have cramps (stomach ache) and diarrhea (loose stools). These effects could appear approximately 2 weeks after starting radiation therapy.
- There may also be blood in your stools (on rare occasions). If this occurs, notify your care team.
- Do not hesitate to ask to see a dietitian.
- Sitz baths may help alleviate the burning feeling with bowel movements (refer to explanations on page 9).

For advice in case of diarrhea, please read the pamphlet:

DIARRHEA

Side effects on the bladder

You may have symptoms because of the radiation therapy or a urinary tract infection. You may feel:

- A need to urinate more often;
- Pain or a burning sensation when urinating;
- Difficulty starting to urinate.

If you experience urinary symptoms, here is what you can do:

- Drink plenty of water throughout the day;
- Avoid caffeine (coffee, black tea, cola), alcohol, spices and tobacco;
- Notify your care team. The staff will check for a bladder infection. You may be prescribed medicine to help you feel better.

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Hair

Hair loss may occur in the treated area (pubic area). Often, this hair grows back some time after completion of treatments.

Effects on fertility

Radiation therapy in the pelvic area may be harmful to the reproductive system. If you have questions or concerns, feel free to discuss them with your care team.

Women

If you are a woman of reproductive age, you should discuss contraception with your radiation oncologist. You must not get pregnant during your treatments. If you are or suspect that you are pregnant, notify your nurse or radiation oncologist immediately.

Radiation therapy in the pelvic area may lead to menstrual cycle disturbances. You might also experience menopause symptoms, such as hot flashes, mood swings, vaginal dryness and insomnia. Depending on the type of cancer and treatments, these side effects could be temporary or permanent.

Men

Depending on the type of cancer and treatments, the radiation field could be near the testicles. You could therefore receive a radiation dose that would reduce sperm counts and fertility. You might also experience

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andropause symptoms (male menopause), such as reduced sex drive, hot flashes, mood swings and insomnia.

Sex life

Cancer and cancer treatment can change the ability to enjoy or have sex.

If you or your partner have questions, ask your radiation oncologist or a radiation therapy nurse.

You can also read the “Sex, Intimacy and Cancer” booklet available from the Canadian Cancer Society.

Women

Unless otherwise advised by your doctor, you can continue to have sex during your treatments. However, sexual intercourse may cause discomfort due to vaginal narrowing and dryness of vaginal tissues.

Applying a **water-based*** vaginal lubricant (e.g. K-Y[®] lubricant, Astroglide Liquid[®], Replens[®]) or changing positions during sexual intercourse could help.

***Attention:** Since there are several types of vaginal lubricants available, make sure to choose one that is **water based**. A pharmacist can help you make the right choice.

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Men

Unless otherwise advised by your doctor, you can continue to have sex during your treatments. However, if you receive a **chemotherapy** treatment during your radiation therapy, it is recommended that you use a condom during sex. Radiation therapy in the pelvic area may decrease your ability to achieve or maintain an erection (impotence) and cause other erectile dysfunctions.

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 treatments can cause very similar symptoms.

Please tell your radiation oncologist, a radiation therapy nurse or radiation therapist if you have other symptoms.

Completion of treatments

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 care team until you feel better.

If you must have a follow-up appointment with your radiation oncologist, we will inform you of the date and time of your appointment.

Women

Your doctor could recommend that you use a vaginal dilator shortly after the end of your treatments. If this is the case, follow the instructions

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provided by your care team and those found in the document entitled “***Vaginal dilation***”.

Once your treatments are over, do not hesitate to call the Oncology Centre at **506-862-4005** if you have questions or concerns. We take calls Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. However, if your condition worsens and the situation is urgent, go to the Emergency Department.