

Possible Side Effects

OF RADIATION FOR HEAD AND NECK CANCERS

External beam radiation therapy is not invasive, so it is rare for side effects to show up immediately. Side effects are different for each patient. In some cases, side effects lessen within several weeks, but with more intensive treatment the time for improvement takes longer.

- **Mild tiredness** may develop. However, fatigue from radiation therapy should improve within a few weeks after radiation treatment ends.
- **Skin irritation** may occur including redness, peeling or blistering and some swelling or tenderness and pain.
- **Difficulty or pain when swallowing** is common as well as **dry mouth or thick phlegm**.
- **Change in voice** may occur along with swelling of the voice box and hoarseness.
- **Hair loss** on the head, neck and face may be experienced.
- **Irritation of the mouth and throat** often occurs, causing pain, as well as **change in taste**.
- **Weight loss** is likely due to the possible side effects.

The way that food tastes and the amount of saliva you produce should improve after treatment ends and pain should start to resolve.

Some side effects can be controlled with medications and changes to your diet. Ask your doctor or nurse whether you should make changes to your diet. Tell them if you experience any discomfort so they can help you feel better.

Visit
www.rtanswers.org
to download a complete
chart of side effects.

Organ System	Side effects Head and Neck Cancer Radiation Treatment	
	Early Complications (Days-Months After Treatment)	Late Complications (Months-Years After Treatment)
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acute fatigue • Weight loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic fatigue (tiredness) • Second cancer (rare, but increased risk with continued smoking)
Skin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redness • Peeling and/or blistering • Swelling • Tenderness or pain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tissue scarring, thickening, firmness (fibrosis) • Coloration changes (lighter or darker) • Tissue thinning
Salivary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dry mouth • Thick secretions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dry mouth
Taste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased or altered taste 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dry mouth
Throat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain with swallowing • Difficulty swallowing • Need for a feeding tube 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased or altered taste • Difficulty swallowing • Need for a feeding tube
Mouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain • Ulcerations • Difficulty opening mouth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty opening mouth • Radiation necrosis of jaw • Dental problems
Eyes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swelling • Tightening of muscles • Changes in voice • Hoarseness • Swelling of voice box 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tightening of muscles • Changes in voice • Hoarseness • Swelling of voice box • Decrease in eyelid function
Ears	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased tearing • Irritation • Dry eye 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased tearing • Dry eye • Vision changes (rare) • Cataract
Hair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling of fullness • Irritation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased hearing
Nose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facial hair loss or thinning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facial hair loss or thinning
Lungs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritation • Increased discharge • Dryness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dryness
Arm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflammation • Shortness of breath • Cough 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scarring • Shortness of breath • Cough • Nerve dysfunction (rare)

HELPFUL WEBSITES ON HEAD AND NECK CANCERS

National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research

www.nidcr.nih.gov

Oral Cancer Foundation

www.oralcancer.org

Support for People with Oral and Head and Neck Cancer

www.spoehnc.org

LEARNING ABOUT CLINICAL TRIALS

The radiation oncology treatment team is always exploring new ways to improve treatments through studies called clinical trials. Today's treatments are a result of trials completed years ago, proving that radiation therapy safely and effectively kills cancer cells and is a safe long-term treatment. For more information on clinical trials, visit:

National Cancer Institute

www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials

Radiation Therapy Answers

www.rtanswers.org

Radiation Therapy Oncology Group

www.rtog.org



ABOUT THE RADIATION ONCOLOGY TEAM

Radiation oncologists are cancer doctors who also oversee the care of each patient undergoing radiation treatment. Other members of the radiation oncology team include radiation therapists, radiation oncology nurses, medical physicists, dosimetrists, social workers and nutritionists. To locate a radiation oncologist in your area, visit www.rtanswers.org.

ABOUT ASTRO

The American Society for Radiation Oncology is the premier radiation oncology society in the world with more than 10,500 members who specialize in treating cancer with radiation therapies. ASTRO is dedicated to improving patient care through education, clinical practice, advancement of science and advocacy.

AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR RADIATION ONCOLOGY

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Radiation Therapy for Head and Neck Cancers



In 2018, The American Cancer Society estimates that in the United States, approximately 3-5 percent of all cancers will be in the head and neck region. This year, an estimated 64,690 people (47,650 men and 17,040 women) will develop head and neck cancer. 13,740 deaths (10,250 men and 3,490 women) will occur this year as a result of this cancer diagnosis.

