



THE AUSTIN CENTER
FOR
RADIATION ONCOLOGY

PATIENT CARE INFORMATION RADIATION THERAPY TO HEAD AND NECK

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS:

Local

- Soreness of the mouth and/or throat
- Difficulty swallowing
- Dry mouth
- Thickened saliva
- Taste changes / altered smell
- Hearing changes / “stuffiness” of the ears
- Laryngitis (hoarse voice)
- Radiation dermatitis (irritation of skin on the face and neck)

General

- Fatigue
- Decrease in blood counts

POSSIBLE LONG TERM SIDE EFFECTS:

Local

- Permanent decrease in saliva production, resulting in:
 - Persistent dry mouth
 - Increased risk of cavities
- Thyroid changes that may require hormone replacement

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS:

You will be receiving radiation therapy treatments from a machine called a Linear Accelerator. During treatment the skin and oral mucosa (the lining of the mouth and throat) are likely to undergo some changes. Please help us protect your skin, mouth and throat by following the instructions and alerting us to any changes and concerns you may have.

NUTRITION:

Proper nutrition is an essential part of your treatment plan. Radiation therapy may cause difficulty in your ability to eat normally. We will do our best to help you throughout your treatment. Some things you can expect are:

- Weekly weights (more frequently if necessary)
- Nutritional counseling
- Information and samples of nutritional supplements

Other possibilities may include:

- Additional lab work to evaluate your nutritional status
- Medications to stimulate appetite
- Medications for pain / symptom management
- Intravenous (IV) hydration
- Consideration for a “PEG” feeding tube
- Moisturize the skin using **ONLY** recommended products: Do not apply 4 hours prior to radiation therapy

LOTIONS

- Eucerine
- Lubriderm
- Biafine (this is a prescription)
- Pure Aloe Vera Gel
- Aveeno

OINTMENTS

- Aquaphor
- Calendula

- Protect skin from the sun
- Avoid injury, trauma, or scratching in the treatment area
- The skin gradually returns to normal over a 4-6 week period following treatment.

SYMPTOM MANAGEMENT:

Patients often experience side effects related to the treatment. Most side effects resolve after treatment has been completed and some time has allowed healing to occur. Some side effects take longer to go away, and some may be permanent.

- **Radiation dermatitis:** Follow the skin care instructions. As the skin reaction increases, you may switch from a lotion to an ointment. Also, you may combine products such as aloe and Aquaphor to promote healing and comfort.
- **Sore mouth and/or throat/swallowing problems:** Avoid citrus fruits, juices, and tomato sauce. Also avoid hard, rough, crunchy foods like peanuts, pretzels, chips, and crusty dry breads. Eat softer foods, fruit nectars, and liquid supplements that are high in protein. (Ensure, Boost, etc.) Use the baking soda mouth rinse frequently. (6-8 times/day, especially after eating.) Use prescription mouth rinses as prescribed (Caphosol Solution samples available). **Avoid alcohol and tobacco!**
- **Dry mouth:** Moisten foods by “dunking” them. You may try gravies, sauces, soups, and blenderizing foods. Try more liquid supplements to improve protein and calorie intake. Drink a lot of fluids. Several products are available over the counter for dry mouth, such as artificial saliva, and oral moisturizer sprays. Dental chewing gum and tart hard candies may promote salivation. The physician may prescribe a medication to help promote salivary function.
- **Thickened saliva:** Drink a lot of fluids. Also try the following mouth rinses to help cut the thick saliva:
 - Sparkling soda water
 - ¼ tsp. meat tenderizer in 8 oz. water
 - Papaya juice
- **Taste changes/altered smell:** Avoid highly seasoned foods. Flavor foods with sugar and add fruit juice to milk shakes, custards, and puddings. Marinate meat in soy sauce or sweet juices. Try foods at room temperature.

FOLLOWING RADIATION THERAPY:

The skin reaction may peak in the first two weeks after radiation therapy is completed. Continue with the recommended skin care. The skin will gradually return to normal within 4 to 6 weeks.

Other side effects will vary in the length of time they take to go away. Taste changes may take up to a year to return to normal. Dry mouth may always remain. Sore throat may persist for weeks and will gradually improve. Be patient and PLEASE call if you have ANY questions and/or concerns.

ORAL HYGIENE

*****NO ALCOHOL OR TOBACCO PRODUCTS*****

It is very important to take excellent care of your mouth throughout treatment and beyond. The following instructions will help promote good oral hygiene and protect your mouth and throat from products and/or practices that may cause harm during treatment.

- **Dental evaluation:** All patients should see their dentist before treatment starts.
- **Fluoride application:** Should be done regularly as instructed by your radiation oncologist.
- **Normal saline and baking soda mouth rinse/gargle:** Use frequently throughout the day and as often as you like. This rinse helps to moisten the mouth and cut thickened saliva. Mix together the following ingredients:
 - 16 ounces of water
 - 1 teaspoon of baking soda
 - ¼ teaspoon salt (optional)
- You may use an over the counter mouthwash as long as it does **NOT** contain **ALCOHOL**.
- You may use “artificial saliva” products available over the counter.
- Use a SOFT toothbrush.
- Continue flossing if it is part of your routine. Do not start flossing if it is not.
- Drink a lot of fluids.
- Go “sugar free”. To decrease the risk of cavities avoid sugary/sticky foods.
- Report mouth sores, difficulty swallowing, a coating on the tongue, or other problems.
- Use prescribed mouth rinses as directed (Caphosol Solution samples available).

SKIN CARE (*Applies to the treatment area*):

The skin in the head and neck area is very sensitive to radiation. Because the skin is thin and the area is curved, the reaction may be brisk. Help us protect your skin by following the skin care instructions:

- Wash area GENTLY
- Use hands, not a wash cloth
- Use a mild cleanser, such as Dove, Basis, Aveeno
- Pat dry
- Avoid rubbing, massage, or friction
- Avoid perfumes, colognes, pre-shave, aftershave, etc.
- Moisturize the skin using **ONLY** recommended products:

LOTIONS

- Eucerine
- Lubriderm
- Biafine (this is a prescription)
- Pure Aloe Vera Gel
- Aveeno

OINTMENTS

- Aquaphor
- Calendula

****DO NOT** apply anything to the skin at least **FOUR** hours **PRIOR** to radiation therapy**

******ONLY apply after your treatment******

- Protect skin from the sun
- Avoid injury, trauma, scratching in the treatment area.
- The skin gradually returns to normal over 4-6 weeks following treatment.