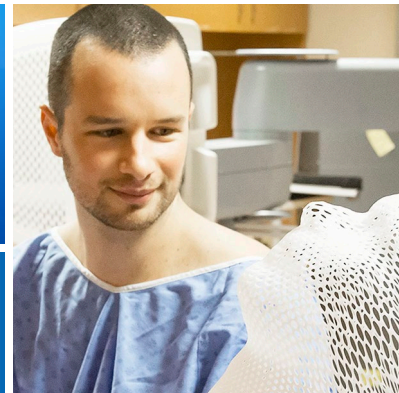


# Treating ENT cancer with radiation therapy

## (head or neck)



**Your doctor has prescribed radiation therapy to treat ENT cancer. This fact sheet describes this treatment and the precautions to be taken to ensure everything goes as smoothly as possible.**

ENT (ear, nose and throat) cancer includes several cancers located in the head or neck. The most common are those of the tongue, throat, vocal cords, nose, and sinuses.

### What is radiation therapy?

Radiation therapy is a treatment using radiation, i.e., high-energy x-rays, to destroy cancer cells in the diseased area and stop them from spreading and developing further.

Radiation affects cancer cells AND the normal cells of the body through which it passes to reach tumours. While most cancer cells are permanently destroyed, a large part of the normal cells repair themselves.



### What are the first visits for?

Their purpose is to prepare you for the treatment and then to start it.

#### 1st visit: making your mask

Usually, a plastic mask is made that is exactly the same shape as your face and neck, to make treatments easier. The precise points where the radiation will be aimed are marked on the mask, so you won't have any marks on your face. Making the mask is painless, and the material used is comfortable and easy to use. While the mask is being made, you will lie on your back with your neck on a special support.

#### 2nd visit: planning scan (CT scan)

During this visit, the medical team will examine the inside of your body using an imaging device called a scanner. This test is called computerized tomography, or CT scan. The team will use the scan to define precisely the area of your body that will be treated and to avoid touching areas that are not sick. This is called the "treatment plan".

### 3rd visit: verification and first treatment

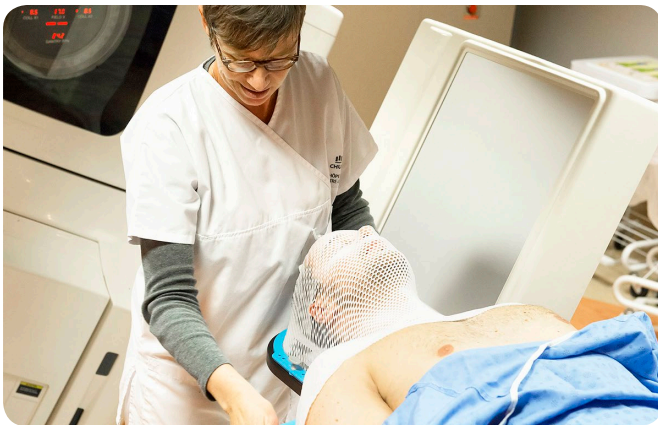
First, the technologists will meet with you to discuss the steps of the treatment. Feel free to ask them any questions.

In this third visit, they will make sure the area to be treated follows the treatment plan. You will have to take the position that you will be in for the treatments. You will be given the accessories you need to be able to maintain your position.

Then you will receive your first treatment immediately.

### What happens during the treatments?

During your treatments, you will need to maintain the same position.



The mask is used, among other things, to maintain a stable position during treatment.

At each session, the technologists first ensure that everything is working as it should from a technical standpoint. After making sure you're in the correct position, they leave the room. But an intercom and cameras keep you in touch with them. They can see and hear you, and you can talk to them.

After your treatment, a technologist will give you the date and time of your next appointment.

### How long do the treatments take?

Each session takes about 20 minutes. Usually you'll receive treatments for 6 to 7 weeks, every day, Monday to Friday. You'll see your doctor regularly, who will ensure that the treatments run smoothly.

### Will I feel any pain?

During the treatments, you won't feel any pain. However, you'll probably have side effects during or after the treatments.

### What inconveniences and side effects should I be aware of?

You'll have to travel every day for your treatments. Try to organize things so that your daily life is not too disrupted.

#### The main potential side effects are:

- Swelling and rash in the mouth and throat, which can be painful. To ensure that you continue to eat properly, you'll be followed by a nutritionist and a speech therapist (specialist in speech and swallowing). If it becomes difficult to swallow solids, eat purees and liquids.

In some cases, a small tube (nasogastric tube) may be used to feed you. This tube, inserted into the nose, goes directly to the stomach. This may be useful if you're unable to swallow for a few weeks.

- Pain in the area being treated (if this happens, your doctor may prescribe a pain medication).
- Changes in your ability to taste.
- Decrease or thickening of your saliva.
- Skin redness, similar to sunburn.
- Fatigue.
- Weight loss.

## How should I prepare **BEFORE** my treatments?

- Eat a healthy diet based on *Canada's Food Guide*.
- You will also meet with a hospital dentist who will make sure your teeth are healthy. Sick teeth will have to be treated. Some could be removed to avoid the risk of infection during and after treatment.
- If you haven't already done so, stop smoking and drinking alcohol. The sooner the better.

## How should I take care of myself **DURING** the treatments?

- > During the treatments, you'll meet with a nutritionist to discuss your diet and a speech therapist to assess whether you might have difficulty swallowing. They'll follow you over the course of your treatments.
- > Take care of your mouth.
  - Gargle 10 to 12 times a day with a mixture of 1 litre of water, 1 teaspoon (5 ml) of salt and 1 teaspoon (5 ml) of baking soda.



- Maintain good oral hygiene (teeth brushing, flossing, etc.).
- Drink plenty of water, to keep your mouth humid and hydrated.



- > Take care of your skin.
  - Wash the parts treated by the radiation using a mild, unscented, neutral pH soap, without lanolin. If necessary, get advice from a pharmacist. **Don't use any other product on the treated skin without first talking to your doctor.**
  - Rinse your skin and sponge it gently to dry it out. Don't rub it.
  - Wear loose clothing to reduce irritation of treated areas. Choose cotton or natural fabrics.
  - Cover the treated area to protect it from the sun.
  - Don't apply heat or cold directly to the treated areas.
  - Don't bathe the treated area in chlorinated, salty or lake water.
- > Eat enough to maintain your weight.
- > Eat a healthy diet based on *Canada's Food Guide*.
- > Don't take any antioxidant supplements or natural health products without first talking to your doctor.
- > If you're fertile, use contraception for the duration of the treatments.

### Attention

Advise the technologists if you have any problem: skin irritation, diarrhea, pain, nausea, vomiting, etc.



## What precautions should I take AFTER the treatments?

Side effects may appear or increase within 10 days of the end of treatment. Here are some tips to help you maintain your well-being:

- Continue to gargle until your doctor tells you to stop.
- Apply the cream prescribed by your doctor or an unscented moisturizer **until your skin has returned to normal**.
- If any area of your skin is oozing (covered in liquid), tell your clinical practitioner.
- Slowly resume your activities.
- If you are fertile, use contraception for 6 months after the end of treatment.
- Stop smoking and drinking alcohol, if you haven't already done so.
- Continue to eat a healthy diet, as recommended by *Canada's Food Guide*.



- Do moderate exercise. For example, walk 30 minutes a day, several times a week.
- Go to all your follow-up appointments and talk to your doctor about any new or persistent symptoms. Don't hesitate to share your concerns with your doctor.

## Chemotherapy

You will probably also receive chemotherapy injections. Your clinical practitioners will take this into account when planning your radiation therapy appointments. The frequency and side effects of chemotherapy will be explained to you by your doctor. Remember to notify the technologists of any changes (schedule or otherwise) to your chemotherapy treatments.

## Can I cancel or postpone a treatment?

We strongly recommend that you don't miss any treatment session. If you have a major impediment, you must call the technologists.

## Who should I talk to if I have questions?

The technologists are your resource persons for the duration of your radiation therapy treatments. Let them know if you have any questions, concerns, or discomforts. If they can't answer you, they'll direct you to the right person. After the treatments, your clinical practitioner will be your contact person.

You will be given their contact details on your first visit.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site [chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)

*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
[chumontreal.qc.ca](http://chumontreal.qc.ca)