

# Treating anal or rectal cancer with radiotherapy



Your doctor has proposed radiotherapy to treat anal or rectal cancer. This fact sheet describes this treatment and the precautions to take so that everything goes as smoothly as possible.

## What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is a treatment that uses radiation, that is, high-energy X-rays. Its purpose is to destroy cancer cells in the diseased area and prevent them from multiplying and growing.

Radiation affects both cancer cells AND the normal cells in the body that it passes through on the way to the tumour. While most cancer cells are permanently destroyed, many normal cells repair themselves.

## What is the purpose of the first visits?

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



We advise you to wear old, dark coloured clothing for your 2 visits. The ink used during the preparation for radiotherapy can stain clothes.



## 1<sup>st</sup> visit: planning scan (computer tomography)

During your first visit, the medical team will examine the inside of your body using an imaging machine, the scanner. This procedure is called computerized tomography, or CT scan. The scan is used to map out very precisely the area of your body that will be treated and avoid affecting the parts that are not diseased. This is called the “treatment plan”.

A technologist will determine the exact position you’ll need to be in during all the treatments. If necessary, he or she will suggest accessories to help you maintain the desired position. Then the technologist will tattoo some small dots on your skin to serve as markers during treatment.

You may need to take in a liquid so that the medical equipment can produce clearer images of the inside of your body. This liquid is given by mouth, injection, or rectum. It's important to tell your doctor if you're allergic to iodine or any other product.

During your preparation visits and treatments, your bladder **must be full**. You'll be given instructions to guide you.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> visit: verification and first treatment

First, technologists will meet with you to discuss the steps of the treatment. Don't hesitate to ask your questions.

In this second visit, they will make sure that the area to be treated matches the treatment plan. You'll be asked to take the position that you'll be in during the treatments. You'll have the accessories needed to maintain your position.

Then you'll receive your first treatment immediately.

## What happens in the treatments?

For each of them, you'll always be in the same position. As in the planning scan, you'll need to have a full bladder.

The technologists first make sure that everything is working properly from a technical standpoint. After checking that you're in the right 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. You'll receive between 25 and 33 treatments. The total number is decided in advance. In most cases, the treatments are done every day, Monday through Friday. At least once a week, you'll see your doctor, who will make sure the treatments are going well.

## Will I feel any pain?

During the treatments, you won't feel any pain. However, you'll probably have some side effects after a few treatments.

## What inconveniences and side effects should I expect?

You'll have to travel every day for your treatments. Try to make arrangements to limit the disruptions to your daily life.

Some possible side effects are:

- Diarrhea
- Abdominal cramps
- Pain at the cancer site (if this happens, your doctor can prescribe pain medication)
- Genital itching
- Burning sensation when urinating
- Skin irritation at the treatment site
- Fatigue

Side effects usually disappear a few weeks after the treatments. However, some may last longer or even become permanent, such as:

- a permanent change in the frequency of bowel movements
- an urgent need to move your bowels
- blood in your stool or urine
- vaginal dryness
- erectile dysfunction
- infertility

The benefits of your treatment usually outweigh the risks of having these side effects over the long term. But the decision is yours, and you can discuss it with your doctor.

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

- Eat a healthy diet based on *Canada's Food Guide*.
- 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?

- > Take care of your skin.
    - Wash the areas treated by radiation with a mild, unscented, lanolin-free soap with a neutral pH. If necessary, ask your pharmacist for advice.
    - Rinse your skin and pat it gently with a towel to dry it, without rubbing.
    - If needed, your doctor can prescribe a cream to use during the treatments.
- Don't use any product on the treated skin without first talking with your doctor.**
- Wear loose-fitting clothing to reduce irritation of the treated areas. Wear cotton or natural fabrics.
  - Cover the treated area to protect it from the sun.



- Don't apply heat or cold directly to the treated area.
  - Don't take very hot baths or whirlpool baths. Sauna is also prohibited.
  - Don't bathe the treated area in chlorinated or salty water or in a lake.
- > Don't erase the marks made by the team on your skin.
  - > Avoid foods that greatly increase bowel activity: whole grain bread, prunes, dried fruit, cucumbers, corn, leeks, fermented cheeses (Brie, Oka), legumes, large amounts of juice and ice cream. Also drink less coffee and milk. A nutritionist will be able to answer your questions, if needed.
  - > Drink plenty of water.

#### What to watch for

Tell the technologists about any problem: skin irritation, diarrhea, pain, nausea, vomiting, etc.

- > Continue to eat a healthy diet based on *Canada's Food Guide*. Don't take any antioxidants or natural health products without first talking with your doctor.
- > If you haven't already done so, stop smoking.
- > If you're fertile, use birth control for the duration of the treatments and afterwards, in line with your doctor's recommendations.

## What precautions should I take AFTER the treatments?

Side effects may occur or increase in the weeks following the end of the treatments. Here are some tips to help maintain your well-being.

- Don't rub the marks made by the team on your skin. They will disappear on their own.
- Apply the cream prescribed by your doctor **until your skin returns to normal.**



- If any area of the skin is oozing (covered with fluid), notify your clinical care provider.
- Continue to avoid foods that increase bowel activity until you start having normal bowel movements again.
- Resume your activities gradually.
- If you haven't already done so, stop smoking.
- Keep eating a healthy diet based on *Canada's Food Guide*.
- Do moderate physical activity. For example, walk 30 minutes a day, several times a week.
- Go to all your follow-up appointments, and talk with your doctor about any new or persistent symptoms. Don't hesitate to tell your doctor about your concerns.

## Chemotherapy

It's likely that you'll also be receiving chemotherapy injections. The clinical staff will take this into account when scheduling your radiotherapy appointments. Remember to notify the technologists of any change (schedule or otherwise) to your chemotherapy treatments.

## Can I cancel or postpone a treatment?

We strongly advise you not to miss a treatment session. If you have a serious constraint, you should call the technologists.

## Who can I contact with questions?

The technologists are your resource persons during the period when you're receiving radiotherapy treatments. Let them know if you have questions, concerns, or discomfort. If they can't answer you, they'll point you towards the right person. After the treatments, your clinical care provider will be your resource person.

You'll be given their contact information at 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 website [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.*

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