

# Treating a lymphoma or leukemia with radiotherapy



Your doctor has proposed radiotherapy to treat a lymphoma or leukemia (cancers of the blood). 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 during these two visits, because the ink used during the preparation for radiotherapy can stain clothes.**



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

During this 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 this scan and all the radiotherapy treatments. If necessary, he or she will suggest accessories (e.g., mask, restraining cushion) to help you maintain the desired position. Then the technologist will tattoo some small dots on your skin that will serve as markers during treatment. Some of these dots may be permanent, but they are usually very discreet.

## 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.

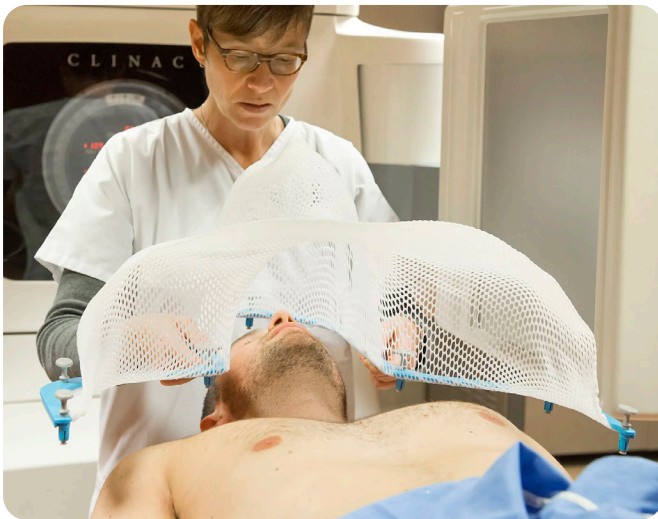
Then you'll receive your first treatment immediately.

### What happens in the treatments?

During your treatments, you'll always be in the same position.

At each session, the technologists first make sure 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.



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

### How long do the treatments take?

Each session takes about 20 minutes. The total number of sessions varies depending on the stage and type of lymphoma or leukemia. It can range from 1 or 2 up to about 20 sessions. This number is determined in advance by your doctor (radiation oncologist). Treatments are usually given every day, Monday through Friday. You'll meet regularly with 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 regularly for your treatments. Try to make arrangements to limit the disruptions to your daily life.

Depending on the area being treated, you could have the following side effects. Your doctor will tell you which ones apply in your case.

- Fatigue
- Skin redness, like a sunburn
- Pain on swallowing, caused by inflammation of your esophagus (digestive tract)
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Dry cough and difficulty breathing, with or without fever, a few weeks after the treatments

These side effects usually disappear a few weeks after the treatments. However, other effects could appear over a longer term, depending on the area that was treated, such as:

- a decrease in your thyroid gland function
- a slight decrease in your lung capacity
- infertility (if the radiotherapy was in the pelvic region)
- a secondary cancer

The benefits of your treatment usually outweigh the risks associated with 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 avoid 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.
  - Use an unscented, aluminum-free deodorant (such as alum crystals).  
**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. Choose cotton or natural fabrics. Wear a loose-fitting, wire-free bra.
  - 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.

### What to watch for

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



- > Don't erase the marks made by the team on your skin.
- > If you are fertile, use birth control for the duration of the treatment.
- > Keep eating a healthy diet based on *Canada's Food Guide*.
- > During the radiotherapy, don't take any antioxidants or natural health products without first talking with your doctor.

## What precautions should I take AFTER the treatments?

Side effects may occur or increase in the 10 days following the end of the treatment. 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 or an unscented hydrating cream **until your skin returns to normal.**
- If any area of the skin is oozing (covered with fluid), notify your clinical care provider.
- If you're fertile, use contraception for 6 months after the end of the treatments.
- 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.

## 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 in your treatment room.

## 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.*

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