

# Treating lung cancer with radiation therapy



Your doctor has suggested radiation therapy to treat lung cancer. Here's what you need to know about this treatment and the precautions to be taken so that everything goes as smoothly as possible.

## What is radiation therapy?

Radiation therapy means treating with radiation - in other words, with high-energy X-rays. It's designed to destroy cancer cells in the affected area and stop them from multiplying and developing.

Radiation affects both cancer cells AND normal cells in the body, which they have to cross to reach the tumours. Most of the cancer cells are destroyed once and for all, while a high proportion of the normal cells repair themselves.

## What happens on the first two visits?

The purpose of the first 2 visits is to prepare for and then start the treatment process.



**Make sure you wear old, dark clothing on your early visits. The ink that's used in preparation for radiation therapy could stain your clothing.**



## First visit: planning scan (CT scan or tomodesitometry)

When you go in for your first visit, the medical team will look inside your body, using an imaging device called a scanner. This test is called a scan or tomodesitometry. The scan allows to precisely delineate the area of your body that needs treatment, avoiding the parts that are not affected by cancer. This is what we call the "treatment plan."

You'll be asked to lie on your back on a special mattress that takes on the exact shape of your body. Your arms will be placed above your head. The technologist will determine the exact position you should be in during all the treatments.

If necessary, he or she will suggest using accessories to help you stay in that position. Then small marks will be made on your skin to serve as reference points during the treatment.

This is a 4D scan. That means images are registered when you breathe in and out. This way, the area to be treated can be precisely delineated. If necessary, you may be given a CD that can help you make your breathing more regular.

### **Second visit: confirmation and first treatment**

First of all, the technologists will discuss the steps in the treatment with you. Feel free to ask them any questions you may have.

The goal of the second visit is to confirm that the area to be treated matches the treatment plan. You'll be asked to assume the position you'll be taking during the treatments. You'll have access to the accessories you need to keep you in that position.

Then you'll receive your first treatment immediately.

### **What happens during treatments?**

You will always be in the same position during your treatments.



The technologists will check every time to make sure things are working well from the technical viewpoint. After making sure you're in the right position, they'll leave the room. But you'll remain in contact with them via intercom and cameras. 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 last?**

Each session lasts about 20 minutes. You'll be getting between 20 and 33 treatments. The total number will be set in advance. In most cases, treatments are given every day from Monday to Friday. You'll see your doctor regularly to make sure that your treatments are going smoothly.

## Will I feel any pain?

You won't feel any contact or pain during treatments. However, it is possible that side effects could appear during or after treatments.

## What are the possible side effects?

You may have any of the following side effects:

- Fatigue
- Trouble swallowing or pain when you swallow
- A feeling of heartburn or gastric reflux
- Loss of appetite
- Slight loss of weight
- Dry cough due to bronchial irritation
- Slight redness of the skin around the treatment area
- Loss of hair on your chest

## 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 stop drinking alcohol. The sooner the better.



## How should I take care of myself DURING my treatments?

- > Continue to eat a healthy diet following the recommendations of Canada's Food Guide. Don't take any antioxidant supplements or natural health products without talking to your doctor. If you have trouble swallowing, choose softer, blander foods. Avoid irritating foods (lemons, grapefruit, oranges, tomatoes, very spicy dishes).



- > Take care of your skin.
  - Wash the areas where you're having radiation with a mild unscented soap, lanoline-free and pH neutral. Ask your pharmacist for advice if needed.
  - Your doctor may prescribe a cream for you to use while you're having your treatments. **Don't use any products on the treated skin without talking to your doctor.**
  - Rinse your skin and pat dry gently, without rubbing.
- > Don't rub off the marks the team made on your skin.
- > If you're fertile, use a reliable contraceptive method the whole time you're having treatments.

### Attention

Tell the technologists right away if you're having problems eating or drinking.

## What precautions should I take AFTER my treatments?

- Go back to your regular activities slowly.
- Stop smoking if you haven't done so already.
- Continue eating a healthy diet based on Canada's Food Guide. Also continue to avoid irritating foods in the first few weeks after your treatments, or talk to your doctor.



- Get some moderate physical activity. For example, walk for 30 minutes a day several days a week.
- Go to all your follow-up appointments and tell your doctor about any new or persistent symptoms. Feel free to talk about your worries.
- If you have symptoms that look like pneumonia (persistent dry cough, short breath and fever), tell your doctor or go to emergency. You could have an inflammation of the lungs due to the radiation treatment. Prescription drugs are available for that.



## Is it all right for me to cancel or postpone a treatment?

We strongly recommend that you do not miss any treatment sessions. If you have an important reason why you can't come, you must call the technologists.

## Who can answer my questions?

The technologists are your resource people while you're having radiation therapy treatments. Ask them your questions and tell them about your worries and concerns. If they don't know the answer, they will send you to the right person. Once your treatments are over, your clinical contact will be your resource person.

You'll be given their contact information 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 website [chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)



### Questions


*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)

