

## Contacts

If you are unable to keep any appointments, or have any questions concerning your appointment, please telephone the Wellington Blood & Cancer Centre as soon as possible.

Radiation Treatment Department  
Level 2  
Wellington Blood & Cancer Centre  
Wellington Regional Hospital  
Private Bag 7902  
Riddiford St  
Newtown

Telephone: 04 806 2000

Monday - Friday: 8am – 4:30pm

5 North Ward oncology nurses are available for **urgent after hours advice** related to your treatment. This is after 4:30pm and on weekends. **Please call: 04 806 0418**

## Advice for Patients Receiving Radiation Treatment to the

## Mouth, Neck and Throat

**Radiation Treatment Department**

**Wellington Blood and Cancer Centre**

## Introduction

This information is designed to inform you and those close to you about caring for yourself during treatment. It is common for patients receiving radiation treatment to the mouth, neck and throat to experience skin reactions, tiredness, and a sore mouth and throat. These reactions build up slowly over the course of treatment. Your treatment team will help you manage these side effects. It is important to remember that patients may react differently.

We believe you should know what to look for, and how to encourage the healing process in your body. You may want to show this booklet to your support person so that they understand the side effects that you may experience, and how they can help you.

It is a good idea to write down any problems or questions you might have over this time. You can then discuss these with your doctor or treatment team next time you see them.

Do not hesitate to ask questions of your treatment team if you have any concerns or are experiencing problems.

## After Treatment

Reactions usually peak about 2 weeks after treatment and gradually improve over several weeks to months. Continue with the advice in this brochure until the reactions heal.

The skin in the treated area will always be more sensitive to the sun. Keep the area covered as much as possible and use a sunscreen SPF 30+.

Regular dental review is important, especially if your mouth has been left dry after treatment. If you have a new dentist, you must inform them that you have had radiation treatment. There are long term effects on your teeth and jaw that may affect the treatment they give you.

## Support Services

Please ask a member of your treatment team if you would like more information or to access any of these services.

- Cancer Society
- Counselling (general / relationship / sexual issues)
- Social work
- Support groups
- Whanau Care
- Pacific Health
- Takiri Mai Te Ata / Regional Stop Smoking Service
- Chaplains
- Massage

## Can I smoke during treatment?

We strongly advise you to stop smoking as this worsens the side effects of treatment and may make treatment less effective. Please speak to your treatment team about support available to help you stop smoking.

## Contraception during and after Radiation

### Treatment

If you are a woman of childbearing age, it is important that you do not become pregnant during your treatment. This is because radiation treatment given during pregnancy can harm a developing baby. Before starting treatment you will need to confirm that you aren't pregnant and that you understand you should avoid becoming pregnant during treatment (this means you will need to use a reliable form of birth control if you are sexually active). You can ask your doctors for information about this.

## People involved in your care

**Doctor:** A doctor will see you at least weekly to check how you are coping with the treatment and to prescribe medications to help with side effects.

**Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS):** The CNS or a staff nurse will see you regularly, advise on management of side effects, and support you through your treatment.

**Radiation Therapist:** The radiation therapists give you your treatment and will assess you each day. Please let them know if you have any problems as they can contact other members of the treatment team.

**Dietitian:** The dietitian supports you to maintain your weight throughout treatment .

**Speech-Language Therapist (SLT):** The SLT may see you to advise on swallowing, voice quality and speech.

**Dentist:** Hospital dentists will assess your teeth and advise you about products which help look after your mouth during and after your treatment.

**Community Cancer Nurse:** The Community Cancer Nurse will visit you at home, if needed, to support you during and after your treatment.

**Social Worker:** The social worker can advise on financial entitlements, travel allowances, and can provide emotional support during treatment.

## Treatment Reactions

### How will my mouth react to treatment?

The lining of your mouth may become sore, red and ulcerated, and you may develop a dry mouth and taste changes.

### How can I care for my mouth during treatment?

- Brush your teeth twice a day with a soft toothbrush and a fluoride toothpaste. If this becomes uncomfortable, your treatment team can suggest other toothpastes and mouthwashes to help keep your mouth clean.
- If you wear dentures, take them out and clean them after meals. If your mouth becomes sore you may need to take your dentures out.
- Use the following mouthwash four times a day (after meals and before bed) to keep your mouth clean and rinse out thick saliva

**Mix ¼ teaspoon of salt and ¼ teaspoon of baking soda in a glass of warm water. Rinse and spit out several times.**

- The Dentist may recommend other mouth care products for you to use as well, such as dry mouth products. These are comfortable to use and may help prevent severe ulceration during your treatment.

## Fatigue (Extreme Tiredness)

Most people having radiation experience tiredness or fatigue during their treatment. This can be caused by a number of factors - the radiation treatment and its' side effects, chemotherapy, travelling to and from treatment each day, changes in routine and anxiety about treatment. You may need to take time off work during and after your treatment. If this is a problem, your treatment team can refer you to a social worker. If you are having difficulty sleeping, please let your treatment team know.

### How can I reduce my fatigue?

- Save your energy for the things you enjoy
- Ask friends and family for help with chores and preparing meals
- Take regular rests and some gentle exercise
- Let your treatment team know if you are not managing at home as there may be help available.

## How can I look after my skin?

### What should I do?

- Ask the treatment team where the treatment area is.
- Use a simple moisturiser such as Health E fatty cream, calendula cream, Aveno or Dove on the treated area. Do this at least twice a day. You can use this on your scalp if you lose your hair.
- Use a mild soap e.g. Dove or baby soap.
- Wash your hair using a mild shampoo e.g. baby shampoo.
- Personal hygiene is important so please bathe or shower regularly. Use a soft towel and pat the skin dry rather than rubbing it.

### What shouldn't I do?

- Expose the treated area to direct sunlight – wear a hat or a scarf.
- Expose the treated area to excessive heat e.g. hair dryers.
- Use any cosmetics e.g. foundation or powder, or any other creams (including sunscreen), lotions, perfumes, or aftershaves on the area.
- Use a wet shaver in the area we are treating. If you would like to shave please use an electric shaver.

## What should I do if my mouth becomes sore?

- Let your treatment team know as you may need painkillers.
- Let food and drink cool down before you eat.
- If it is painful to chew or swallow then choose softer foods such as soup, yoghurt or porridge.
- Try to drink nutritious liquids such as milkshakes and smoothies.

## What should I do if my mouth becomes dry?

Saliva helps protect your teeth from decay and helps with eating. A dry mouth is caused by damage to the salivary glands from radiation treatment and can be permanent. It is important if you have a dry mouth to follow the advice below.

- Drink often. Carrying a water bottle with you can help you remember to drink. Don't use carbonated water or fizzy drinks in your bottle as these will damage your teeth.
- Chewing sugar-free gum may help stimulate saliva to flow.
- There are products called **ORAL 7** available from the dental department to keep your mouth moist. These include a gel, toothpaste and mouthwash. Speak to your treatment team about these products and how to get them if you need them.

- There are also products to help prevent dental decay. You will need to keep using them if your mouth is dry.
- Only use the recommended mouthwashes. You will need more frequent dental check-ups if your mouth is dry.

## **Taste Changes**

Taste changes are caused by damage to the taste buds from radiation treatment and are usually temporary. This may mean you need to try different foods while you are having your treatment. Taste usually begins to recover several weeks after treatment finishes but may take many months to return, or may be permanently altered.

## **Nausea and Vomiting**

Some people may experience nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting (being sick) with treatment. Please tell your treatment team if you feel sick.

## **Constipation**

Many people experience constipation (difficulty passing a poo) during treatment as a result of medication side effects or changes to diet. Please tell your treatment team if your bowels haven't moved for two or three days, or if you are feeling uncomfortable, so we can arrange medication to help.

## **Skin Reactions**

During your radiation treatment you are likely to experience a skin reaction in the treatment area. Reactions may include:

- Skin becoming pink or red.
- Skin becoming dry and flaky.
- Skin feeling warm.
- Skin feeling itchy.
- Skin becoming sore and sensitive.
- Skin blistering, breaking, peeling or weeping.

These reactions are normal and the severity of the reaction differs from person to person. Your treatment team will advise you how to look after your skin if you have any of these reactions