

## 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 Women Receiving Radiation Treatment to the

## Pelvis

**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 pelvis to experience skin reactions, diarrhoea, constipation, urgency or pain when passing urine, and changes to the tissues lining your vagina. These reactions build up slowly over the course of treatment. Your treatment team will help you manage these side effects, and it is important to note that patients may react differently. Do not hesitate to ask questions of your treatment team if you have any concerns or are experiencing problems.

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 they also have an understanding of your treatment.

It is sometimes 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.

## After Treatment

Reactions usually peak about 1-2 weeks after treatment. Most people find that side effects resolve about 3 - 6 weeks after treatment. Continue with the advice in this brochure until the reactions have subsided.

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+.

## 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
- Psychologist
- Support groups
- Massage
- Fit for Life
- Chaplains
- Look Good Feel Better [www.lgfb.co.nz](http://www.lgfb.co.nz)

## Skin

During your radiation treatment you are likely to experience a skin reaction in the pelvic area.

Reactions may include:

- Skin becoming pink or red.
- Skin feeling warm.
- Skin feeling itchy.
- Skin becoming sore and sensitive.
- Skin blistering, breaking, peeling or weeping particularly in the area between the buttocks, vulva and groin
- Temporary loss of pubic hair.

These reactions are normal and the severity of the reaction differs from person to person.

## How can I look after my skin?

From the beginning of your treatment: -

- Use a simple moisturiser such as Health E Fatty Cream, Aveno or Calendula Cream on the treated area including between the buttocks and in your groin however do not use the cream in your vulval area. Do this twice a day.
- Use a mild soap e.g. Dove or baby soap.
- Personal hygiene is important so please bathe or shower regularly. Use a soft towel and pat the skin dry rather than rubbing it.

- Wear loose cotton or silk underwear if possible to reduce friction. Natural fibres are usually better tolerated.
- Do not expose the treated area to excessive heat or cold e.g. electric blankets, hot water bottles, ice packs.
- Do not use sunscreen in the treatment area while you are having treatment.

If the skin between the buttocks, vulva or groin becomes irritated or sore, let the treatment team know. The following advice may be helpful:

- Try bathing in a warm bath with ¼ cup of salt added.
- Use unscented baby wipes instead of toilet paper.
- There may also be special cushions available to make it more comfortable to sit down when your skin is sore. Your treatment team will be able to advise you about this.

During your treatment contraception is still important. If you are able to conceive it is important you do not have unprotected intercourse during your radiotherapy treatment. Please don't hesitate to ask your treatment team if you will still need to use contraceptives.

## **After Treatment**

If you have stopped having intercourse during your treatment you may want to wait for the treatment reactions to subside before you try again. It is a good idea to follow the advice above when you first start trying. If it is too uncomfortable the first time try again in a few days' time as you may need a little more time to heal inside. Sometimes if intercourse is difficult or painful you may feel tense or anxious. It is important to relax and try talking to your partner about how you are feeling. If you are having difficulties please call the department and ask to speak to a member of your treatment team.

Some patients feel nervous about having sex during treatment because they are worried their partner may be affected. Cancer cannot be passed to your partner. You may also be concerned about the radiotherapy affecting your partner but radiation does not stay in the body so you will not harm them.

For some women it may also be too uncomfortable to have intercourse during treatment. The advice below may help you overcome some of these issues and can be followed after treatment when you want to start having intercourse again.

## **Sexual Intercourse during Treatment**

If you decide and are able to carry on having intercourse during treatment, take your time. It may be painful or cause discomfort. Your vagina may also be drier than usual. Use plenty of vaginal lubricant which is available from the pharmacy or supermarket. This will help alleviate these symptoms.

You may feel more comfortable using positions that allow you to be in control e.g. sitting on top, astride your partner will not only let you set the pace but also the depth of penetration. You could also try lying on your side in a 'spooning' position. You may notice slight bleeding after having intercourse. This is normal but if you have any concerns let your treatment team know.

## **Urinary Symptoms**

Changes within your bladder while having treatment to the pelvis are common. Reactions may include:

- Urinating more often (this may be more noticeable during the night)
- Stinging or burning while urinating
- Difficulty urinating

If you have these symptoms there are ways you can help.

- Drink plenty of fluids
- Drink cranberry juice as this may help relieve the symptoms

Please inform your treating team if you are experiencing any of these side effects as there may be other things you can try.

## **Tiredness**

Some people experience tiredness during their treatment. This can be caused by a number of factors - travelling to and from treatment each day, change in routine, anxiety about treatment, recent chemotherapy or hormone therapy, and the radiation treatment itself. If you are tired you may require a nap in the afternoon or may need to take time off work. If you are having difficulties sleeping then mention this at your weekly review.

## **Diarrhoea**

Diarrhoea is a loose, often watery bowel motion. There may be mucous or blood in your bowel motion, and some stomach cramping or pain.

Diarrhoea often starts after 1-2 weeks of treatment. If you already take medication to keep your bowels regular, you may need to stop taking this while having treatment. It is also important to keep drinking plenty of fluids.

Please inform your treating team if you experience diarrhoea and they can give you advice on things you can do to help.

## **Constipation**

Constipation is where your bowel motions become infrequent, dry and uncomfortable. There may be some stomach cramping, pain, and a bloated feeling. Please inform your treating team if you are experiencing any of these side effects. It is also important to keep drinking plenty of fluids.

There is a dietician available to advise you on what to eat and drink if you are experiencing constipation or diarrhoea. Please ask the treatment team if they think this is appropriate for you.

## **Smoking**

We strongly advise you to stop smoking as this can worsen the side effects of treatment. You may find this very difficult. Please speak to your treatment team about support available to help with this.

## **Changes in Vaginal Tissue**

Radiation Treatment to the pelvis may cause changes to the tissues lining your vagina. Towards the end of your treatment, and for some weeks after you may notice that your vagina feels tender and irritated, and notice some spotting may occur, slight bleeding.

Once the treatment finishes, and the tissues start to heal, scarring and narrowing of the vagina may occur. This can make it uncomfortable for your doctor to examine you at follow up appointments and can make sexual intercourse difficult.

About 2 weeks into your treatment schedule, if appropriate for you, the treatment team will talk to you about how you can help prevent or manage vaginal side effects.

## **Advice for Women on Sexual Activity**

You may wish to continue having sexual intercourse during your radiotherapy treatment however for some people this may not be possible or may not be recommended. The doctor will talk to you about whether this is appropriate for you. Some women may not want to have sex or may feel afraid or even embarrassed. This is not uncommon at all.

There are many different reasons you may not feel like having intercourse. You may have lost interest in sex particularly if you feel anxious or tense regarding your health.