

Radiation therapy is usually well tolerated and many patients are able to continue their normal routines. However, some patients may eventually develop painful side effects. Be sure to talk to a member of your radiation oncology treatment team about any problems or discomfort you may have.

Many of the side effects of radiation therapy are only in the area being treated. For example, a breast cancer patient may notice skin irritation, like a mild to moderate sunburn, while a patient with cancer in the mouth may have soreness when swallowing. Some patients who are having their midsection treated may report feeling sick to their stomach. These side effects are usually temporary and can be treated by your doctor or other members of the treatment team.

Side effects usually begin by the second or third week of treatment, and they may last for several weeks after the final radiation treatment. In rare instances, serious side effects develop after radiation therapy is finished. Your radiation oncologist and radiation oncology nurse are the best people to advise you about the side effects you may experience. Talk with them about any side effects you are having. They can give you information about how to manage them and may prescribe medicines or changes in your eating habits to help relieve your discomfort.

The side effect most often reported by patients receiving radiation is fatigue. The fatigue patients experience is usually not severe, and patients may be able to continue all or some of their normal daily activities with a reduced schedule. However, treating cancer often requires considerable mental and physical effort. Whenever possible, try to take time during your treatment to rest and relax.

Many patients are concerned that radiation therapy will cause another cancer. In fact, the risk of developing a second tumor because of radiation therapy is very low. For many patients, radiation therapy can cure your cancer. This benefit far outweighs the very small risk that the treatment could cause a later cancer. If you smoke, the most important thing you can do to reduce your risk of a second cancer is to quit smoking.