

# Radiotherapy

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## Upper Gastrointestinal (GI) Treatment



Illawarra & Shoalhaven  
Cancer Care Centres



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# General information

This booklet will help you with your journey through radiation treatment. The information is general and may not always apply to you. Please talk with your treating team if you have any questions.



## IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS

Illawarra  
Cancer Care  
Ph: 4222 5200

Shoalhaven  
Cancer Care  
Ph: 4428 7400

You will need to contact the cancer centre if you have:

- Difficulty swallowing
- Nausea / Vomiting
- Pain in treatment area.

**Out of hours go to  
your nearest emergency  
department**

### Need an interpreter?

Professional interpreters are available if you need help to communicate in English, or if you are Deaf. Our staff can also ask for an interpreter. The staff will book an interpreter for you. Interpreter Services are free and confidential. You can bring a family member or friend with you to the appointment. If you need help to communicate it should be through a professional interpreter.

You can also call the Translating and Interpreting Service on **1800 24 72 72** if you need to speak to us before an appointment.

# Support services



There are a number of services available to help support both you and your family.

- ☐ **Counselling support for patients and carers affected by cancer**
  - Access to social worker and/or psychologist.
- ☐ **Local community support for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people**
  - Support services and criteria vary across the local communities. Some services are Grand Pacific Health, Aboriginal Medical Services, and Waminda.
- ☐ **Legal and financial assistance**
  - Cancer Council - 13 11 20 [www.cancercouncil.com.au](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au)
  - **Can Assist** - [www.canassist.org.au](http://www.canassist.org.au)
  - Centrelink - apply online for payments such as JobSeeker, Disability Support Pension, Carer Payment or Carer Allowance.
  - Advance Care Directive - [www.health.nsw.gov.au/patients/acp/Pages/acd-form-info-book.aspx](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/patients/acp/Pages/acd-form-info-book.aspx)
- ☐ **Practical help in the home**
  - My Aged Care 1800 200 422
  - Carer Gateway 1800422 737
- ☐ **Transport / Travel**
  - There is community transport for those that have difficulty, at a small fee.
  - Travel & accommodation subsidy (IPTAAS). If travelling more than 200km per week: [www.iptaas.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.iptaas.health.nsw.gov.au)
- ☐ **Accommodation**
  - For those who have difficulty getting to the cancer centre, we have on-site accommodation available at both centres.
- ☐ **Support for children**
  - Camp Quality - support for children 0-15 years [www.campquality.org.au](http://www.campquality.org.au)
  - CANTEEN - support for young people 12-24 years [www.canteen.org.au](http://www.canteen.org.au)

**Each cancer centre may have extra information for you.**

# My radiotherapy care team

## Radiation Oncologist

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

### What they do:

A doctor who prescribes radiotherapy and organises your treatment.

## Radiation Oncology Registrar

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

### What they do:

A doctor who is training to be an oncologist. They are always supervised by your radiation oncologist.

## Clinical Nurse Consultant

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

### What they do:

A nurse with specialised knowledge of upper gastrointestinal cancer who will help coordinate your care, provide information, referrals and support.

## Radiation Therapist

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

### What they do:

Specially trained to plan and deliver your treatment. They will also help support you through treatment.

## Radiotherapy nurse

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

### What they do:

Specialise in caring for people having radiation therapy. They manage your side effects, and will help support you through treatment.

## Social Worker

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

### What they do:

Provides counselling, support and information for you and your family. They can help with important conversations in planning for your future.

## Psychologist

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### What they do:

A specialist who provides psychological assessment and interventions for cancer patients, and where required, to families and carers.

## Radiation Oncology Medical Physicist

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### What they do:

Ensures that your treatment is delivered accurately and safely. You may see them at your planning appointment.

## Dietitian

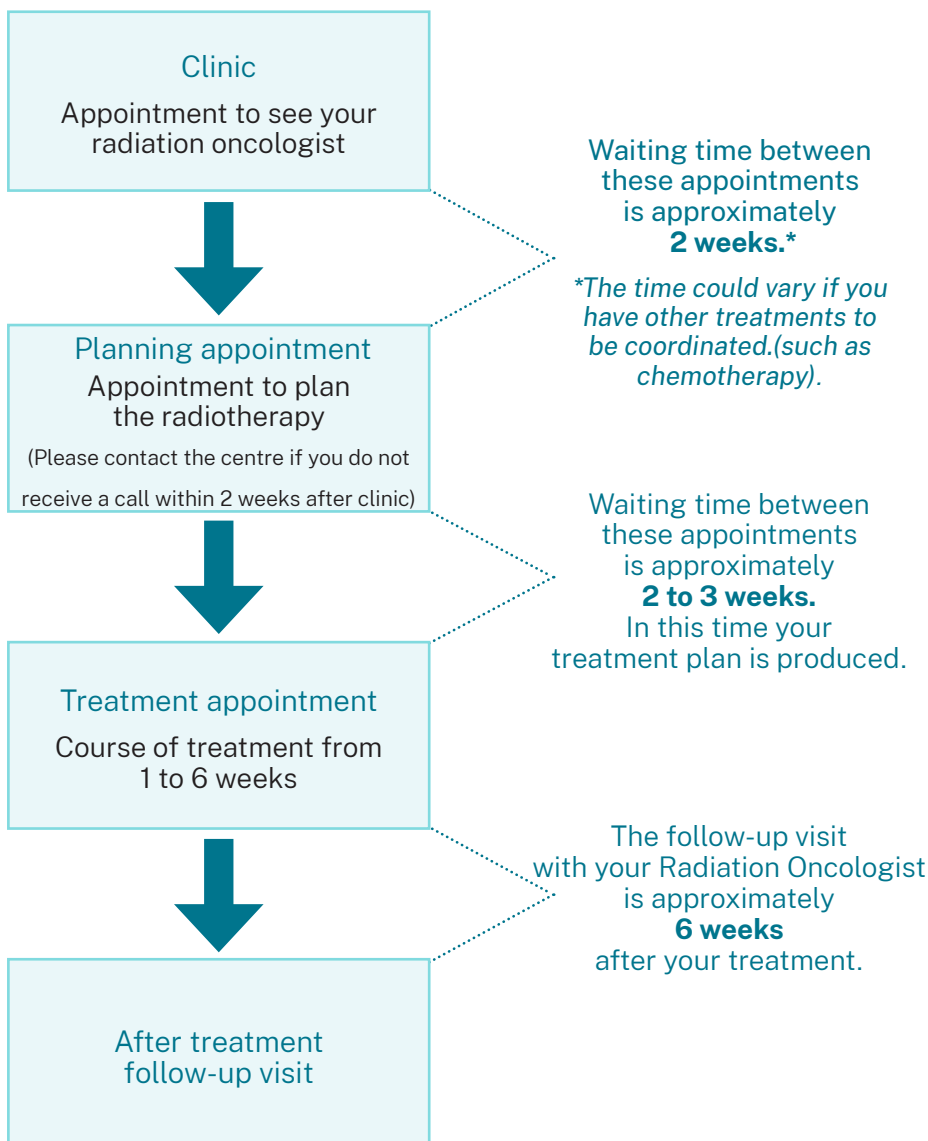
Contact: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### What they do:

Advise and support you to maintain weight and nourishment.



# Your pathway





**Linear accelerator**

# What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy uses x-ray beams to kill cancer cells.

A linear accelerator is a machine that delivers radiation to your body. It only gives radiation to the specific area that is being treated.

Your Radiation Oncologist will decide how much radiation you will receive and how many times you will receive it.

When deciding this, they will take into account:

- Your age and general health including any other medical conditions you may have.
- Details about your specific cancer. These include biopsy report, blood results, scans, the stage and the location of the cancer (the site).

As part of your cancer treatment, radiotherapy can be given either:

- Before surgery, after surgery or as a standalone treatment
- With or without chemotherapy/targeted treatment
- Or, to help with symptoms.

For chemotherapy/targeted treatment you will be seen by a medical oncologist who will discuss this with you.

If relevant to you (female and childbearing age), the Radiation Oncologist will ask you if you are pregnant when you consent to treatment.

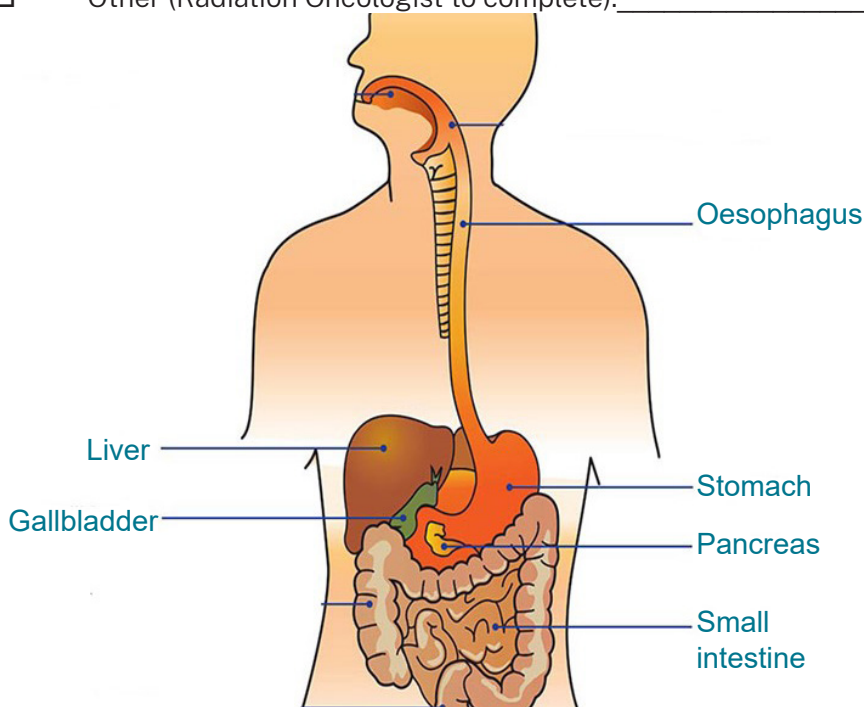
It is important to not get pregnant during treatment. If there is a chance you get pregnant, you will be asked to take a pregnancy test before the planning appointment and your treatment appointments.

The exact area that will receive radiation depends on where the cancer is. The Radiation Oncologist will use the scans mentioned above so that the radiation is focused on these areas.

Only the areas required to be treated will be affected by the radiation.

Your treatment area may include:

- ☐ Oesophagus
- ☐ Stomach
- ☐ Pancreas
- ☐ Liver
- ☐ Other (Radiation Oncologist to complete): \_\_\_\_\_



# What side effects can the treatment cause?

Radiotherapy can cause both short-and long-term side effects. Short-term side effects occur 10 to 14 days into your treatment. Long-term side effects can occur 1 to 2 years after your treatment has finished.

Your side effects will depend on the area you are having treatment. Your Radiation Oncologist will discuss the side effects relevant to your situation.

It is important that you stop smoking during radiotherapy. Smoking can increase the chance of side effects from the treatment as well as reduce the chances of being cured from your cancer.

## Common short-term side effects

### **Oesophagitis and indigestion (heartburn)**

This is an inflammation of the oesophagus (food pipe). You may notice a burning sensation or difficulty swallowing due to discomfort in the oesophagus. You may experience heartburn. Not all people experience this and it depends on the amount of radiation the oesophagus receives.

### **Fatigue/tiredness**

The amount of tiredness varies for each person. It usually builds up over the course of your treatment.

### **Difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)**

You might experience difficulty swallowing food or liquids. This might feel like food or liquid gets 'stuck' on the way down the oesophagus. This might be severe in some people and require a feeding tube for adequate nutrition.

## **Common short-term side effects continued.**

### **Reduced appetite, nausea and vomiting**

You may feel sick or vomit from radiotherapy. The chances are higher if you have chemotherapy at the same time.

### **Diarrhoea**

Radiation to the stomach may cause your bowel motions to become more loose and more frequent than usual.

### **Constipation**

Some anti nausea medications can cause constipation, it is important your bowel motions are regular if you are prescribed these medications.

### **Skin**

Your skin may become pink or red, or feel warm and may look similar to a sunburn. It could be dry, itchy, flaky or feel more sensitive to touch than usual.

## **Possible intermediate term side effects**

### **Lung inflammation (Pneumonitis)**

This is due to inflammation in the lungs caused by the radiotherapy. You may have a cough and shortness of breath from 1 to 6 months after radiotherapy. This may need to be treated with a course of steroids.

## Possible long-term side effects

### Narrowing of the oesophagus (stricture)

If your oesophagus is in the treatment area, a rare long term side effect is the narrowing of the oesophagus, making it difficult to swallow (get food down).

### Lung inflammation and scarring

There is a possibility of lung changes that may affect the breathing if a large proportion of your chest needs to be treated and if your lung function is poor. This is uncommon.

### Heart problems

Depending on the location of your cancer, the heart may receive some radiation. This may increase the risk of damage to your heart many years later. This is uncommon.

## Rare side effects

### Oesophageal fistula

Radiotherapy can cause damage to the oesophagus that might lead to an ulcer and in rare cases, a tear can occur. This can be very serious.

### Second Cancer

The risk of the radiation treatment causing a second cancer is extremely rare. If it does cause a second cancer, it will be in the treated area and a different type you had treated.



## Fatigue/tiredness

To help manage your tiredness during your treatment.

- Try some light exercise when you are feeling least tired during the day
- Keep a diary to see what time of the day you are most tired
- Listen to music/read books
- Meditate or use relaxation exercises
- Spread out and prioritise what you need to get done over the day
- Ask others for help
- Rest when you need to, but limit daytime naps to 45 minutes
- Eat a healthy diet with plenty of fluids-we can help you with this.

## Physical activity

Many studies have shown that exercise during radiation treatment can ease side effects, including fatigue and sleeping problems.

- Exercise can be walking, running, group classes or gym workouts
- If you currently exercise, try maintain your current exercise habits
- If you do not currently exercise and want to start, please discuss with your Radiation Oncologist, Nurse Consultant or General Practitioner. You may be referred to a local program, for example CanConquer.



# Radiotherapy planning appointment

On this day we will give you information about the radiotherapy process. It is important to understand what is going to happen.

We will make equipment to keep you still, take a scan and mark the treatment area.

**Please allow 1 to 2 hours for this appointment.**

You may be asked to fast (not eat or drink) for your planning appointment. If this is relevant to you, your Radiation Oncologist will discuss with you and the radiation therapist will call you and remind you of this before the planning appointment.

Before or during this appointment you will be given a Patient Reported Measures survey. It will take 5 to 10 minutes to complete. The survey will ask you questions about your health and wellbeing. (More information on the next page).

An appointment card will be given to you. This will have your start date and treatment appointment times.

## Identity check

Before we can start, you will be asked to tell us:

- Your name
- Your date of birth
- What area on your body will be treated with radiotherapy.

This is a NSW Health requirement and helps us to identify you. It confirms we are treating the right person and part of your body. We will ask you this every day when you attend your radiotherapy treatment.

# Patient Reported Measures Survey

## What are Patient Reported Measures (PRMs)?

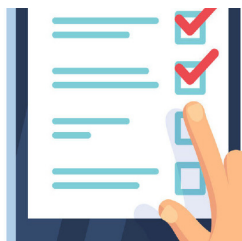
- PRMs are a way for you to tell your healthcare team about your general wellbeing and provide feedback about your care.
- As part of our standard practice, you will be asked to complete a survey with questions to help us identify any issues that may be causing you worry and distress.
- It is important to complete this survey as it will help your health care providers understand more about how you are feeling, and how your health and treatment might be impacting different parts of your life.
- Our aim is to deliver the best health care for you.

## Do I have to complete a survey?

- No, surveys are not compulsory.
- If you don't complete a survey, you will still receive the best care available. However, completing a survey gives your healthcare team more information about what is important to you.

## When will I be asked to do the survey?

- You will be asked to do the survey before or during your planning appointment and again during treatment.



## During the planning appointment

You will need to remove the top half of your clothing and change into a gown at the beginning of the appointment. Once you are on the CT scanner bed, you will be asked to remove the gown so the Radiation Therapist can see your skin and be able to position you.

Please note that during the scan, part of your skin will be bare (naked) from the chest to the abdomen area (depending on where you are receiving treatment). You may want to keep this in mind when choosing clothes and also who you bring as a support person. If you have concerns about this, please discuss with staff so we can arrange extra support.

Your Radiation Oncologist may want to give you an injection, this is called contrast. This will help them see the area to be treated on the CT scan, we will talk to you about this on the day of your planning appointment.

There are 3 steps to the planning appointment:

1. **Make equipment for your treatment**
2. **Take a CT (computed tomography) scan of the treatment area**
3. **Create tattoos and photos.**

### 1. Equipment

We will use equipment that helps you to be stable and still for your treatment.

You will lie on the CT scanner bed in a “bean-bag” (called a vacbag). It will shape around your upper back and shoulders.



Vacbag

## 2. CT scan

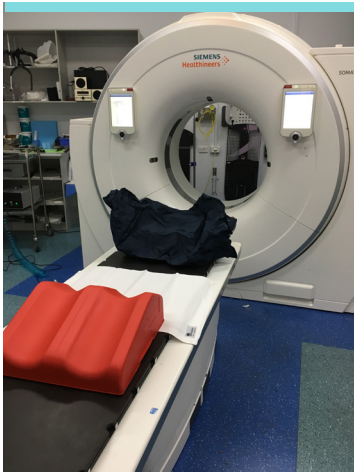
Texta and sticky markers will be placed on your skin before the CT scan. These help us to map out the treatment area and can be seen on the scan.

A CT scan will be taken of your chest/abdomen area.

You will need to lie still and breathe normally during this scan.

The staff will leave the room while the scan is being performed.

This scan is used to plan your treatment.



The CT scanner with vacbag

The approximate size of the tattoo.



## 3. Tattoos and photos

You may be given small permanent tattoos at the end of the planning appointment. These can help to make sure we put you in the same position on the treatment bed each day.

We will take photos of how you have been set-up and the equipment that has been made for your treatment. These photos help treatment staff set you up in the same position each day.

# Radiotherapy planning

Your radiation team will create a plan for you between your planning appointment and the start of your treatment.

The CT scan that was taken at your planning appointment is used to create the plan. It is designed specifically for you. This can take up to 2 weeks depending on how difficult the individual plan is.

Sometimes the start of treatment can be delayed due to the difficulty of the plan.

Many checks are completed to make sure we are going to be delivering the right treatment for you.



Radiotherapy planning team

## 20 • RADIOTHERAPY - YOUR UPPER GI CANCER TREATMENT GUIDE

# Radiotherapy treatment

You will receive radiotherapy daily.

You will be set up in the same position as your planning appointment. It will take 20 to 30 minutes for your treatment.

## Treatment times

Treatment is usually 5 days a week, Monday to Friday.

You will be given a weekly list of appointment times, which you should check as they may change.

Treatment machines may need to be closed for maintenance. If you need treatment on those days, the staff will inform you.

Due to other patients receiving treatment, please inform the Radiation Therapists as soon as possible if you need to change an appointment or are running late.

## Your first treatment appointment

On your first day please arrive 15 minutes before your appointment time and see the nurses at the nurse's desk before you sit down.

A Radiation Therapist will explain what will happen and answer any questions you may have.

Your first treatment is usually longer than your other appointments as we need to check measurements from your planning appointment.

Please allow an hour on your first day. This will allow us to give you all the information you need and deliver your treatment.

## Medication to help with nausea

Depending on where the treatment is, you may need medication to help with symptoms of feeling sick (nauseous). This will be prescribed by your Radiation Oncologist.

## Arriving in radiotherapy

Please check yourself in for your treatment. You do this by scanning the barcode on your appointment card at the nurse's desk. Once you have checked in you can take a seat in the waiting room.

One of your treatment radiation therapists will come and get you when they are ready for you to have your treatment.

## How long will my treatment take?

The time needed to deliver your treatment can be between 20 to 30 minutes.

The time in the treatment room includes:

- Getting you into the correct position.
- Delivering your treatment.
- Helping you in and out of the room.

## In the treatment room

The Radiation Therapists will ask your name, date of birth and treatment area every day.

The same as at your planning appointment, you will be given a gown to change into.

The Radiation Therapists will put you into the same position using the same equipment from the planning appointment.

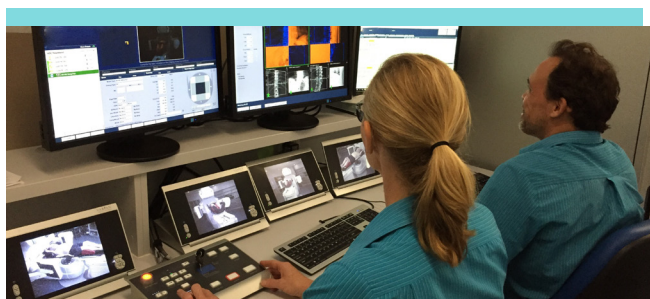
Once you are on the linear accelerator, the Radiation Therapist will position you. Please note that your skin will be bare (naked) during the treatment.

During your treatment you are able to listen to music. We can make a playlist for you, or you can bring in your own music.



### When the Radiation Therapist leaves the treatment room:

- You will be in the room by yourself for 5 to 10 minutes.
- It is important to lie still during the treatment and breathe normally (unless other instructions have been provided to you).
- Parts of the machine will move into position to take x-rays. These x-rays are taken before we give you your treatment to make sure everything lines up and we are treating the correct area.
- The treatment machine moves around you to give you your treatment, but it does not touch you.
- You can alert us at any time by talking or raising your hand.
- You will not be able to see or feel anything during the treatment, however you will hear a noise when the machine turns on.



Staff outside the treatment room checking your position

## During your course of radiation treatment

All instructions given to you by the radiation staff need to be followed for every treatment.

Tell the radiation staff as soon as possible if you are not able to follow these instructions.

You will have x-rays taken throughout your treatment. This is to check the position of the treatment area. The x-rays are not used to check how treatment is working. Other measurements are also taken during your treatment. This is to check for any changes in your body shape.

It is important to try and maintain your weight during treatment. Any major changes in the shape and size of your body may change our calculations, which may require a new CT scan.

Every day during your treatment, the radiation team will check on your wellbeing. They will watch for side effects and any problems you may be having.

If you need more help, staff can arrange for you to see other members of your radiotherapy care team.

You will not feel any effects from the treatment directly after the appointment.



# Managing side effects during treatment

Side effects generally start 2 to 3 weeks into your treatment.

In most cases, these symptoms will settle 2 to 4 weeks after treatment.

Please talk to radiation staff before taking any medications for your side effects.

Many patients will be reviewed weekly by the **Upper GI Cancer Support and Therapy Service**. They will help you manage your symptoms and any side effects that you may experience during and after your treatment.

The Upper GI Cancer Support and Therapy Service will also provide support and guide you on the type of food and drink that is best for you at the weekly review.

At this appointment you will see a:

- Clinical nurse specialist /consultant
- Dietitian

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## Swallowing difficulties

If your oesophagus is within the treatment area it is likely that you will develop some discomfort when eating.

You may be referred to a dietitian to help you manage this. It is important for you to keep drinking fluids and eating a nutritional diet during your treatment.

You may need to:

- Change your diet to include softer foods
- Use pain relief prior to eating
- Avoid eating hot and spicy food
- Use anti-reflux medications. These may be helpful in some circumstances.

## Feeling sick (nausea or vomiting)

Most patients would have been prescribed medication to help with nausea before treatment started. If you still feel sick, the nurse can help review the medication. You may need to change medications. It is important to maintain fluids.

## Constipation

On occasion the medication to help with feeling sick may cause constipation (hard to pass a bowel motion). The nurse will review this and you may change medications, or a laxative will be suggested. Do not start taking a laxative without talking to the nursing team.

## Physical activity

Many studies have shown that exercise during radiation treatment can ease side effects, including fatigue and sleeping problems.

- Exercise can be walking, running, group classes or gym workouts
- If you currently exercise, try maintain your current exercise habits
- If you do not currently exercise and want to start, please discuss with your radiation oncologist, nurse consultant or general practitioner. You may be referred to a local program, for example CanConquer.

## Fatigue-Tiredness

To help manage your tiredness during your treatment:

- Try some light exercise when you are feeling least tired
- Listen to music/read books
- Meditate or use relaxation exercises
- Spread out and prioritise what you need to get done over the day
- Ask others for help
- Rest when you need to, but limit daytime naps to 45 minutes.

## Skin

You need to start your daily skincare from the first day of your treatment. If relevant to you, you will be given cream to apply to the treatment area daily.

**If you have been given sorbolene cream,** apply:

- After every treatment
- At bedtime
- As often as you like, but not within two hours of your next treatment.

**If you have been given StrataXRT cream,** apply:

- One to two times daily -as directed by staff.

If you are unsure or it is unclear of where or how much to apply, please talk to the radiation therapists or nursing staff.

Additional to the above creams, you will also need to follow the general skin care advice section on the following page during your radiation treatment.

# General skin care during your treatment



Use a mild soap such as Dove Sensitive Skin Unscented<sup>®</sup>, Aveeno Moisturising Bar<sup>®</sup>, Goat Milk or other unscented soap



Wear loose clothing during treatment. A top and bottom is easier to get on and off when changing into a gown for treatment



Have a quick shower every day. Use warm, rather than hot water



Gently pat dry the treatment area with a clean towel



Do not apply soap directly to the treatment area, and make sure you rinse well



Do not apply any oils, colognes, lotions or talcum powders to the treatment area.

# After radiotherapy



On your last day of treatment a follow-up appointment will be booked with your Radiation Oncologist in 6 weeks.

Any side effects that you have had during your treatment will start to improve around 2 weeks after your treatment has finished.

## Last treatment

On completing your last treatment we will:

- Make sure any side effects you are having are being managed
- Tell you who to contact if you have any treatment related problems
- Make a follow-up appointment for you with your Radiation Oncologist in 6 weeks after your radiotherapy.

## After treatment

Some patients with swallowing or nutritional issues may require ongoing weekly review by the Upper GI Cancer Support and Therapy Service. This may be for 1 to 4 weeks after treatment.

## Skincare

It is important to look after your skin as you have been during your treatment.

Any redness of the skin will usually improve 4 to 6 weeks after finishing your radiotherapy.

## Fatigue

The tiredness you may have felt during treatment will improve after a few weeks.

## Follow-up appointment

Your first follow-up appointment with your Radiation Oncologist will be 6 weeks after you finished your treatment. This will have been booked on your last day of treatment.

At this appointment:

- Any other side effects that you may be having will be discussed
- You may be asked to have other scans depending on your specific case
- You can also talk about any concerns you may have from your radiotherapy treatment.

## Ongoing follow-up care

After treatment, follow-up care is important for your long-term health.

Your follow-up care will depend on the type, stage of cancer and the treatment you had.

Follow-up care should be agreed between your Radiation Oncologist, General Practitioner, other health professionals and takes into consideration your preferences.

In some cases, people will need ongoing, hospital-based care for several years. In other cases, an arrangement with your General Practitioner may be suitable.



# Frequently asked questions



## Will radiation therapy be painful?

While treatment is being delivered, you will not see or feel anything. The delivery of radiation is like having an X-ray or CT scan. You will hear the machine making a buzzing sound.

## Will I be 'radioactive'?

No, receiving radiotherapy will not leave you radioactive at any time. It is safe to be with family, children, friends and pregnant women.

## Should I take medications and/or vitamins while receiving treatment?

It is important to tell your radiation oncologist all the medicines, supplements and vitamins you are currently taking. Continue to take your prescribed medicines as normal. Some vitamins or supplements could impact on the treatment.

## Will I lose my hair?

Radiotherapy only affects the area being treated. You may have hair loss around the treatment area.

## Can I have a Covid-19, flu or tetanus vaccination?

Yes, it is safe to receive these while you are having your treatment.

## Where can I park during treatment?

Free parking is available while you are having your treatment (not for doctors appointments).

Illawarra Cancer Care Centre: You can park in front of the centre, accessed by New Dapto Road. You will be given a unique passcode to open the boomgate.

Shoalhaven Cancer Care Centre: You can park at the rear of the centre. Go to the boom gate, take a ticket from the machine and have it validated at the main reception desk.



### How long will treatment take?

The length (or course) of radiation is based on the specific plan designed for you by your doctor. Generally, you will be in and out of the centre within 30 minutes for each treatment. Delays may occur on some days.

### How much does my treatment cost?

Medicare covers all costs (for those eligible for Medicare).

### Is it a problem if I miss a scheduled treatment?

Radiation treatment is designed to be delivered as small daily treatments to get the best outcome. Once treatment has started it is important that the rest are not delayed or missed. Sometimes medical reasons can cause a treatment to be delayed or missed, your radiation oncologist will discuss this with you.

### What should I wear to treatment?

Wear loose fitting cotton clothes. Do not wear clothes that are tight or that may rub the area.

### What happens if I lose/gain weight while I am having radiotherapy?

The radiation therapists will monitor any changes in your body shape during your treatment. They will take measurements each day. If your body changes too much a new plan may be needed.

# Resources

## Online resources for additional information

Cancer Council –

[www.cancer.org.au/cancer-information/treatment/radiation-therapy](http://www.cancer.org.au/cancer-information/treatment/radiation-therapy)

eviQ Cancer Treatments Online –

[www.eviq.org.au/eviQNavigationPatientsandCarers.aspx](http://www.eviq.org.au/eviQNavigationPatientsandCarers.aspx)

QUITLINE 137848 [www.quit.org.au](http://www.quit.org.au)

Targeting Cancer – [www.targetingcancer.com.au](http://www.targetingcancer.com.au)

The Illawarra Shoalhaven Cancer and Haematology Network –

[www.islhd.health.nsw.gov.au/radiation-therapy](http://www.islhd.health.nsw.gov.au/radiation-therapy)

Look Good Feel Better – Free community service program designed to assist and manage the appearance related side effects of chemotherapy/radiotherapy, call 1800 650 960

CanConquer – Specialist allied health team providing targeted exercise and education for the patient pre, during and post cancer treatment.

Please speak to your Clinical Nurse Consultant to find out the referral process for attending CanConquer, or call 02 4207 9999 (Illawarra).

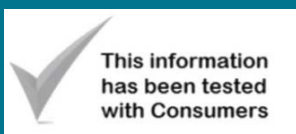
### Cancer Council information

Cancer Council information centres are located on Level 2 at the Illawarra Cancer Care Centre and the main foyer at the Shoalhaven Cancer Care Centre.

There is a range of information and volunteers available to assist at both centres.

## Notes





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If you would like to provide feedback on this booklet, please email [ISLHD-ISCAHN@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:ISLHD-ISCAHN@health.nsw.gov.au)