



# Understanding Radiation Therapy

A Guide For People With Cancer



National Cancer  
Centre Singapore  
SingHealth

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**Special thanks to the following members who have contributed to the development of this booklet:**

*Dr Khoo Tan Hoon Seng* | Radiation Oncologist

*Ms Chew Pheck Geok* | Manager, Dept of Radiation Oncology

**Text**

*Flora Yong* | Senior Nurse Manager, Cancer Education & Information Service

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## INTRODUCTION

*This booklet has been developed to help you learn more about radiation therapy, one of the main types of treatment for cancer. It discusses what radiation therapy is, what it is used for, the expected side effects and how to manage it.*

*Each person undergoing treatment reacts differently. The severity of side effects may vary between people. Some people will have no side effects while others may have a few. However, many side effects can be controlled or reduced. Knowing what might occur may help you cope better and assist you in making decisions about treatment.*

*We cannot advise about the best treatment for you. You need to discuss this with your own doctor. However, we hope the information in this booklet will answer some of the questions you may have and help you think about the questions you want to ask your own doctor. This booklet only serves as a guide and its contents are not to be taken as medical advice.*

*If you find this booklet helpful, share it with your family and friends. And if there is any information you are seeking that is not covered here, please contact the Cancer Helpline on telephone **6225 5655** to speak with a nurse counsellor. You can also reach them by email **[cancerhelpline@nccs.com.sg](mailto:cancerhelpline@nccs.com.sg)***

*Other cancer information booklets are available from the National Cancer Centre's Cancer Education and Information Service. You can contact the Cancer Helpline to request for a copy. For electronic version of this booklet, please visit National Cancer Centre Singapore's website: **<http://www.nccs.com.sg>***





## WHAT IS CANCER?

Cancer is a disease of body cells. Normal cells grow, divide and replace themselves in an orderly manner. Under normal conditions, your body constantly replaces cells that are lost either naturally or through injury. The body is able to balance the rate of cell loss with new cell formation. Sometimes, this does not work well, and some cells multiply out of control. Cancer develops when these cells divide too rapidly and grow without any order. This uncontrolled growth may grow into a lump called a tumour.

There are generally two types of tumours. One is able to grow in its place of origin and does not destroy the surrounding normal tissue. They do not spread to other parts of the body. They are termed as benign (non-cancerous) tumours.

On the other hand, there are tumours, which are more aggressive and can destroy surrounding tissues if they are not treated. They also spread to other parts of the body eg. lungs, liver, brain, bones, etc. These are known as malignant (cancerous) tumours.

## HOW CANCER IS TREATED?

There are various types of cancer treatment. These include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, and immunotherapy. The treatment chosen for your cancer depends on many factors. These include age, general health, the type of cancer, origin of the cancer, the severity or stage of the cancer. Depending on these factors the most effective and appropriate treatment will be advised. It may consist of only one type of treatment or sometimes a combination of treatments to ensure that the cancer is adequately controlled.

**Surgery** physically removes the tumour. A surgeon, specially trained in cancer surgery, does this.

**Chemotherapy** uses anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells. These drugs stop cancer cells from growing and reproducing themselves. Chemotherapy can be used before surgery to shrink the tumour or after surgery to prevent more cancer cells from growing. Sometimes, chemotherapy is used together with radiation therapy to increase the efficacy of treatment.

**Immunotherapy** uses chemicals, either natural or synthetic to enhance your own immune system to fight or control the cancer cells.

**Hormonal Therapy** is used in some cancers, which respond to deprivation of their hormone support. These are commonly used in breast cancer or prostate cancer.

**Radiation Therapy** uses high-energy rays to kill cancer cells. This treatment will be explained further in this booklet.

## WHAT IS RADIATION THERAPY?

Radiation Therapy or radiotherapy is the use of high-energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. It can also destroy their ability to grow, multiply or spread. In some cases, it can shrink the size of the cancer. While radiation will affect all cells, normal cells are better able to resist or recover from its effects. Generally, cancer cells are more sensitive to radiation damage than normal cells.

Radiation Therapy is usually given on an outpatient basis, 5 days a week, for several weeks depending the type of cancer. The treatment does not hurt and it will not leave you radioactive. The radiation is not hot; in fact you will not hear, see or feel it.

Side effects depend on the areas of the body that is being treated. For example if the abdominal area is in the treatment field, you will experience loss of appetite, tiredness and some skin reactions such as dry skin and redness. You will learn more about the side effects and how to manage them in this booklet.

## WHY IS RADIATION THERAPY USED?

For some kinds of cancers, radiation is the treatment of choice. It can provide a cure or control the disease. It can also reduce the risk of cancer coming back or sometimes helps to reduce uncomfortable symptoms such as pain.

**Cure** – Many cancers can be cured by radiation therapy, either on its own or combined with other treatments such as surgery or chemotherapy.

**Control** – Where it is not possible to cure a cancer, it may be possible to keep the cancer under control for some time. Radiation therapy can control some cancers by making it smaller or by stopping them from spreading.

## HOW IS RADIATION THERAPY GIVEN?

Before you can receive radiation treatment, you must be seen by a Radiation Oncologist, who is a doctor specially trained to give this type of treatment. He will assess your condition to see if radiation therapy is indeed required or appropriate.

Radiation Therapy can be given in two ways. The most common is called External Beam Therapy (EBRT), where the radiation is directed from the treatment machine to a particular area of your body. The other form is Internal Radiation Therapy or Brachytherapy where a small radioactive material is placed temporarily inside your body in or very close to the cancer. Depending on the type of cancer, you may be given just one form of radiation therapy or even a combination of both.

## External Beam Radiation Therapy

In External beam radiation therapy (EBRT), the treatment unit or machine directs the radiation energy to the cancer. A number of different treatment units are available in the department, each with different radiation energy strength. The one that is most suitable for your treatment will be chosen.

## Internal Radiation Therapy or Brachytherapy

Internal Radiation Therapy or Brachytherapy is another form of radiation therapy where a small radioactive material is placed inside your body in or very close to where the cancer is. This is most commonly used in treating cancers in the cervix, uterus, vagina, head and neck region and sometimes in the esophagus, lung, breast or prostate. This treatment can be given alone or in combination with external beam radiation therapy.



## Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy (IMRT)

This is a form of 3-dimensional conformal radiotherapy that focuses multiple radiation beams onto the tumour. The beam intensities can be varied, so that the highest possible dose can be used to destroy cancerous tissue with relative sparing of normal structures. Sophisticated planning is required to determine the most accurate treatment plan. IMRT may give a higher chance of cure with a lower risk of side effects from the radiation treatment.

## Image-guided Radiation Therapy (IGRT)

Image-guided radiation therapy (IGRT) is a process of using various imaging technologies to locate a tumour target prior to a radiation therapy treatment. This process is aimed to improve the treatment accuracy so that the need for large target margins which have traditionally been used to compensate for errors in localization. As a result, the amount of healthy tissue exposed to radiation can be reduced, minimizing the incidence of side effects. IGRT is complementary to IMRT. IMRT is used to improve the radiation delivery precision and IGRT is used to improve the radiation delivery accuracy.

## Radiosurgery

This form of radiotherapy is used to treat brain tumors. It involves a single or a few high-dose application of radiation to the tumour. Several radiation beams are precisely aimed to converge upon a small tumor within the brain. A device is used to stabilize the head so that it does not move during the treatment.

## HOW LONG IS A COURSE OF TREATMENT?

Treatment for different patients varies from one day to a few weeks. Commonly, the external radiation treatment will be given once a day for 5 days from Monday to Friday. You will rest on Saturday and Sunday. This is done usually over a period of between 1 to 7 weeks. You may be required to receive treatment from one or more treatment machines during the course of your therapy.

Each dose will cause a little more damage to the cancer cells. Therefore, it is important that you go for all your treatments, as you will need the total dose of radiation to eventually kill the cancer cells.

## CHOOSING THE BEST TREATMENT

Your treatment will depend on the type of cancer you have, where it is located and how large it is. It also takes into account your general health and any previous cancer treatments you have had. Your radiation oncologist will explain to you what form of radiation therapy you need to treat your cancer. Some people may only need one form of radiation therapy. While others, may need both. The radiation oncologist will recommend the best treatment for you. Your treatment will be planned in detail, to ensure that enough radiation reaches the cancer, but does as little damage as possible to the surrounding tissues.

### **The staff at the department of radiation oncology**

You will meet a number of different people from the department when you come for your radiation treatment.

**The Radiation Oncologist** is the doctor who takes overall charge of your treatment.

**The Radiation Therapist** does the planning and administers your treatment through radiation machines.

**The Nursing Staff** is also present to attend to your needs like dressing of wounds, giving medication or injections. They also help in coordinating your treatment.

**The Physicist** ensures the treatment machines are working properly and accurately.

**The Dosimetrist** works closely with the radiation oncologist to calculate and plan your treatment.



## HOW DO I PREPARE FOR TREATMENT?

### Before the treatment:

At the first consultation, you will meet with the radiation oncologist to discuss the best treatment for you. Once the treatment has been determined, a series of appointments for necessary procedures to prepare you for radiation therapy will be made. Depending on each case, the patient may need one or more of the following procedures:

- Making an immobilization device
- Making a mouthpiece (if necessary)
- Marking of treatment area
- Simulation

### 1. Making an immobilization device

#### *A Mask or Shell*

The purpose of the mask or shell is to enable the affected area to be held in the same precise position during treatment. Not all patients are required to have a mask or shell. It depends upon the particular type of treatment prescribed by the doctor. This will ensure a fast yet very accurate set-up for your daily treatment.



The mask or shell, which is made from a special plastic material, is designed mainly for patients who need to undergo treatment on the head and neck region or over the arms or legs.

The mask or shell is made in the mould room by a trained technician or radiation therapist. The shell is custom made to fit you alone. The process takes about 15 minutes. The plastic material is immersed in a basin of warm water to soften it for moulding. Once softened, it is taken out of the basin, dried with a clean towel and then placed snugly over the relevant area of the patient. The technician will mould the material over the surface and allow the plastic to cool to room temperature. The plastic sheet will gradually harden to fit the impression of that body surface. This shell is then removed and labeled with the patient's identification. The mask or shell will be used during simulation and /or treatment.

## 2. Making of a mouthpiece

A mouthpiece is a small contoured piece of plastic that is placed in the mouth during simulation and radiation treatment of the head and neck region. The purpose of the mouthpiece is to depress the tongue onto the floor of the mouth to help minimise movement of the tongue and jaw during the radiation procedure. When the mouthpiece is placed in the mouth, you will be asked to clench on it firmly.

### Care of the Mouthpiece

- Wash the mouthpiece with water and wipe it dry. Do not use hot water as it may melt the material.
- Dry the mouthpiece thoroughly and store in a cool, dry place. The mouthpiece comes with container for you to keep it clean and hygienic for use.
- Do not leave the container in direct sunlight or heat as it may melt the wax.

## 3. Marking of the treatment area

### Localizing markings

Once the treatment area has been defined, the radiation therapist will mark on your body, the area that is defined for treatment. Localization marking must not be removed until you have been told you can do so. The radiation therapists will draw the marks daily, as this is essential for daily treatment setup. Since the markings may disappear and are not permanent, skin tattoos are usually essential.



### Tattoos

Tattoos are tiny ink dots made on the skin to mark out the radiation treatment area permanently. The tattoos are made by injecting little drops of Indian ink underneath the skin. A trained radiation therapist will be able to distinguish them from other skin pigments. These tattoos are important in helping the radiation therapists identify the treatment area quickly and accurately. If you have sensitive skin or any concerns about the tattooing, please inform the radiation therapist.



## 4. Simulation

Simulation is an x-ray examination that is meant to simulate the area of treatment defined by the radiation oncologist before the actual radiation treatment begins. This process may or may not be required as it depends on the individual treatment technique used. Usually this is done a few days before the actual day of treatment. The patient may need one or a combination of the following simulation procedures.



### a. Standard Simulation

Standard simulation is usually required for most patients. It is like a normal x-ray procedure. Fasting is usually not required. The process may take up to an hour depending on the complexity of the treatment area being simulated.

### b. Computerized Tomography (CT) Simulation

CT Simulation is another kind of x-ray procedure that is similar to the diagnostic CT scan that the patient may have gone through. The images captured in the CT simulation will be used for detailed three-dimensional computer planning that is necessary for certain types of cancer treatment. Sometimes a contrast is injected into the patient to enhance the CT images for planning purposes.

### c. Verification of Plan (VP) Simulation

VP Simulation procedure is another x-ray procedure that simulates and verifies the radiation treatment area. The radiation therapist will explain the procedure to you. This procedure is essential for very complex treatment techniques where confirmation of the planned parameters is required. Usually the procedure may take slightly more than an hour depending on the complexity of the plan.



## SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIATION THERAPY

The side effects of radiation therapy differ from one patient to another. The types of side effects also depend on the part of the body being treated and also the duration of the treatment. Some patients may have very mild or no side effects at all, while others may experience more severe ones. Your general health can also affect how your body reacts to the treatment.

The following information acts as a guide to the general effects of radiation. The most common are fatigue, skin changes and/or loss of appetite. These can result from radiation to any part of the body. Other effects are specific to the area being treated. Inform your radiation oncologist or the radiation therapist about the side effects that you experience. Most of these can be prevented, controlled or treated with medication.

### Radiation to the head and neck areas

#### *Hair loss*

Radiation therapy can cause hair loss but only to the area that is treated. If the entire head is within the treatment area then you will experience hair loss. This effect may be temporary or permanent, depending on the radiation dosage.

#### *Helpful tips:*

- Avoid exposing your scalp to sunlight, while you are on treatment. Use an umbrella, a hat or scarf to protect your scalp.
- Use a mild or baby shampoo for hair washing to prevent irritation and dryness of the scalp.
- Wearing a stylish wig or hat can help improve your general appearance. For women, applying a little make-up on the eyes, cheekbones or lips will brighten up your face.

The important thing is to do whatever feels comfortable and gives you the most confidence.

#### *Skin and ears*

The skin on the scalp and ear canal may become red. This effect is temporary and will subside soon after the treatment is completed. You can ask your doctor for creams to soothe the soreness. Do not self-medicate by applying medicated lotion on the treatment area.

- Use an electric shaver to prevent accidental cuts on your face and neck, if you need to shave.

### ***Mouth and throat problems***

Soreness of the mouth and/or throat generally appears two weeks after the start of treatment. You will notice that your mouth has less saliva than usual. You may also find it difficult to swallow food and that food tastes different. Do not let these stop you from eating. These side effects may persist even after treatment is over. Ask your radiation oncologist or the radiation therapist for advice to help you to better manage these effects.

### ***Dental problems***

If the oral cavity is within the treatment area, you will more likely experience tooth decay. See a dentist before you start your treatment so that extra care will be taken during your dental check-ups. Discuss with your dentist and radiation oncologist on oral care, prevention of tooth decay and managing problems such as mouth ulcers. It is important that you follow their advice.

### ***Helpful tips:***

- Drink plenty of water throughout the day or suck on ice chips to keep your mouth moist.
- Avoid tobacco and alcoholic drinks because they will dry and irritate the mouth further.
- Drink more fluids, soups or fruit juices.
- Avoid the use of commercial mouthwashes as they contain alcohol that will dry of your mouth. Use the mouthwash prescribed by your doctor or gargle with salt water especially after meals to keep your oral cavity clean.
- Apply oral anesthetics as prescribed by your doctor if your mouth is sore. Avoid eating food that is steaming hot or spicy as they can further irritate the mucus lining of your mouth.
- Avoid drinks and food that is piping hot or icy cold to prevent sensitivity to the teeth and gums.
- Avoid chewing on dry, hard and coarse foods such as nuts, crackers, crisps, and hard candy that may cause friction and abrasion to the already sensitive mouth lining.
- Brush your teeth with a soft bristled toothbrush to prevent injury to the gums.



## Radiation to the chest area

### *Difficulty in swallowing*

If your throat is within the treatment area, it may become sore a week or two after treatment. To minimize the problem:

- avoid smoking, drinking alcohol and eating hot, spicy food
- drink plenty of water between 8 to 10 glasses a day
- eat softer foods such as porridge or soup based foods
- eat small frequent meals
- liquid supplements may be useful
- your doctor may prescribe you some medication to lessen the discomfort

### *Cough*

You may cough more and experience some breathlessness during or after treatment. If your cough is productive of greenish, yellowish, blood stained or foul smelling sputum, please consult your doctor. Some medication may be required to remedy these problems.

### *Skin changes*

The skin on your chest and especially on your back may become darker, just like a suntan effect. This does not require any medication and the discoloration will lighten gradually after treatment.

## Radiation to the breast area

### *Skin changes*

The degree and intensity of the skin reaction will be greater in patients receiving a large daily dose of radiation and in patients who have fair skin. The skin on the treatment site can become red, sore and itchy after a few weeks of treatment. This reaction will remain until about 2 weeks after treatment. To avoid aggravating the skin, you can try the following measures:

- Avoid tight-fitting bras and clothes to prevent friction and irritation to the skin. Choose clothing made from soft material such as cotton.
- Do not apply deodorants, perfumes, talcum powder or medicated lotions on the treatment area. Consult your doctor if you need some skin soothing ointment. Wash the area with lukewarm water and gently pat dry. Avoid vigorous rubbing. If you need to shave your underarm, use an electric shaver to prevent accidental cuts.

### ***Shoulder joint stiffness***

You may experience some stiffness in your shoulder following breast surgery and/or radiation where the upper arm may be involved. Do daily gentle exercises, such as lifting your arm above your head. This will prevent permanent stiffness to the shoulder joint. For more information on arm exercises, contact your Breast Care Nurse or call the Cancer Helpline at **6225 5655**.

## **Radiation to the abdominal area**

### ***Loss of appetite***

Radiation to the abdomen can cause you to have loss of appetite, sometimes even nausea and vomiting. If it is severe, inform your doctor or radiation therapist. Medication can be given to relieve this problem. You may feel tired and sleep more often than usual. These effects are temporary and should subside after your treatment ends.

### ***Bowel changes***

You may experience some discomfort or cramps during the treatment. This is caused by irritation to the digestive tract lining from the radiation treatment. The discomfort is usually mild and temporary. However, if it becomes severe or occurs frequently accompanied by vomiting or fever, please inform your doctor or radiation therapist at once.

### ***Skin changes***

The skin over the treatment area particularly over the back of the body may turn slightly red or become darker, just like a suntan effect. This is temporary and will subside after the entire treatment is completed. Do not self-medicate. Ask your doctor for some topical cream to soothe the irritation.

### ***Skincare:***

#### **Do's**

- Do wear clothing of soft material. Some of the dye markings may rub off on your clothes; it is best to wear loose soft garments.
- Do protect the treatment area from the sun. Always cover your treated skin by wearing light, close-weaved clothing before going outdoors. Ask your doctor about using a sunscreen (SPF 15+ Broad Spectrum).
- Do inform your doctor at once about any skin changes such as cracks, blisters, skin peeling, rashes and signs of skin infection.

**Don't's**

- Don't rub, scrub or scratch treated skin or any sensitive spots.
- Do not scrub off the treatment markings on your skin after your treatment. Let them wear off gradually.
- Don't use any soap, creams, deodorants, medicines, perfumes, cosmetics, talcum powder or other substances on the treatment area without doctor's approval. Many over-the-counter skin products, such as lotions and petroleum jelly, leave a coating that can interfere with radiation therapy.
- Don't put very hot or cold items such as a hot-water bottle or ice pack on the treatment area. Bathing or showering with hot water can also injure your sensitive skin. Use only lukewarm water.
- Don't use a razor on the treatment area. If you must shave, use an electric shaver but first check with your doctor or nurse.

**Radiation to the pelvic area*****Bladder irritation***

Radiation treatment to the bladder can cause some discomfort and irritation when passing urine. You may also feel the urge to go more often than usual. Increase your intake of fluids as this will help to relieve this uncomfortable symptom. If this discomfort persists or worsens such as having bloodstain in the urine, or if you develop a fever, please inform your doctor or radiation therapist at once.

***Bowel changes***

Diarrhoea may occur a few weeks after starting treatment. Reduce the intake of vegetables, fruits, milk and milk products to avoid aggravating the condition. If the diarrhoea worsens, inform your doctor.

***Skin changes***

Some redness and itch may occur on the skin over the buttocks and pubic area. Sometimes it may become sensitive and painful. Avoid wearing tight fitting pants or underwear. The hair on the pubic area may gradually fall if the area is within the treatment field. Request from your doctor some topical cream to soothe the discomfort. Do not apply your own cream or lotion and remember not to erase the treatment markings on the skin.

**Reproductive organs*****Fertility problems***

Having radiation therapy in areas near your reproductive organs can affect your fertility or your ability to have children. This can either be temporary or permanent.



In women, radiation therapy to the pelvic area can result in symptoms similar to those of menopause. Radiation therapy affects the ovaries and the production of female hormones. Menstruation may become irregular or stop completely. Sometimes this alteration reverses itself but some women may experience early menopause when the ovaries stop hormone production permanently.

For men, radiation to the pelvic area may affect the testicles, which may reduce sperm production either temporarily or permanently. However, this does not affect your ability to enjoy sex. Speak to your doctor about your concerns before you start your treatment.



### ***Intimacy and sexual concerns***

You may experience discomfort during sexual intercourse if the pelvic area is within the treatment field. This discomfort is temporary. You may also experience a lower desire to have intercourse because of this discomfort.

In women, the vagina may feel dry, sore and itchy. This can make intercourse painful. A woman's vagina may feel tender during radiation therapy, and for a few weeks afterwards. As the irritation heals, scarring occurs making the vagina narrower and sexual intercourse painful. You may notice some light bleeding after intercourse because radiation therapy can also make the lining thin and fragile.

Regular douching of the vagina is recommended to reduce the risk of infection and also reduce the narrowing. Your doctor can recommend the appropriate cleansing or douching device to use.

Even if a woman is not interested in staying sexually active, keeping her vagina normal in size allow comfortable gynaecologic examination, an important part of follow-up treatment.

Most men find radiation therapy to their pelvic area has little direct effect on their sexual function. This therapy may occasionally affect sexual function when used for cancers of the prostate, rectum and bladder. It affects erection by damaging the arteries that carry blood to the penis. The higher the total dose and the wider the section of the pelvis is irradiated, the greater the chance that an erection problem will develop.

This change usually develops gradually over the year or two following radiotherapy. Some men continue to have full erections but lose them before reaching climax, while others no longer get firm erections. Some feel a sharp pain when they ejaculate, caused by radiation irritating the urethra, the passageway for semen during ejaculation.

In a small group of men, testosterone production slows after pelvic radiation that results in lowered sex drive.



## FOLLOW-UP CARE

### Weekly reviews and follow-up

During the course of radiation treatment, your doctor will review you at least once a week. Your radiation therapist will inform you of your date for review. Once you have completed your course of treatment, you will be required to come for follow-up at the Specialist Oncology Clinic.

No matter what type of cancer or treatment you have had, you will need regular follow-up with your doctor. Follow-up will continue for a few years. This is an important part to your recovery. These check-ups may include x-rays, blood tests and other physical examinations to look for signs that may indicate that the cancer may have returned. You may feel quite anxious at these times. This can make it difficult to put the experience of cancer behind you. So, finding a way to support yourself is part of coping and living with cancer. If you have any concerns or suspicions about your health between check-ups, do not wait for the next appointment. Make an earlier appointment to see your doctor.

It is important that you continue to take good care of yourself. Eat a well-balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids to keep hydrated. Exercise regularly to keep fit and active. Inform your doctor before you start on any exercise programme. You can also return to work between treatments if you feel well and comfortable. Discuss with your doctor about this possibility.

## SUPPORTIVE CARE

Many people feel quite overwhelmed when they learn they have cancer. Depression, anxiety and anger are common but different people will react differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel.

Your family and friends may need as much support and guidance in coping with their feelings as you do. Talking with your family and friends can help, but sometimes it is easier to share your concerns with someone else such as the hospital social worker or a professional counsellor. You do not need to struggle with your illness alone.

It is often tempting to compare yourself with others who have the same illness, or who are having the same treatment. While this can be helpful, you need to remember that no two people are exactly the same. Recovery and follow-up care are different for each person and depend on the treatment you have received. Another person's response to treatment may be quite different from your own.

You may need to adapt to the physical changes in your appearance, your speech or your diet. You may also go through an emotional roller coaster ride. Coping or overcoming cancer is easier for both the patient and family when there are helpful information and support services.

## Cancer Support Group

Support groups offer mutual support and information to people with cancer and often to their families. It helps to talk with others who have gone through the same experience. Support groups can also offer many practical suggestions and ways of coping. You may like to join a support group either now or some time in the future. You can check with your doctor, nurse or social worker whether your hospital runs a cancer support group.

The Psychosocial Oncology unit at NCC conducts various therapeutic workshops and support groups to help patients, their families and caregivers cope with the demands of living with cancer. If you would like to find out more about these activities, call the Cancer Helpline on telephone **6225 5655** for information.

## Oncology Support Group

This is a self-help group for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, radiation therapy or surgery. Family members and caregivers are welcome to attend.

It is conducted primarily by cancer patients themselves. Doctors, cancer-trained nurses and cancer survivors facilitate the support group. These interactive sessions offers opportunity for new patients to interact with cancer survivors and share their experiences, voice their thoughts and fears and share coping strategies.

The Oncology Support Group meets at the Singapore Cancer Society. Admission is free and patients are encouraged to bring along one or more family member. The society also runs other support groups such as Reach To Recovery for breast cancer patients, New Voice Club for patients with laryngeal cancer and Ostomy Club for patients with ostomies. For more information, contact their Nurse Coordinator on telephone: **6221 9577**, Monday – Friday from 8.30am to 6pm.

## Medical Social Services

The Medical Social Service Department at the hospital provide quality patient care to enhance emotional support, financial aid, home care, transportation or rehabilitation. You will need a doctor's referral to the medical social worker.

## Cancer Helpline

Everyone has different needs when it comes to cancer. You may want to talk to someone about what you are going through. The Cancer Helpline at the National Cancer Centre provides a listening ear. Their aim is to help you through the cancer experience. Cancer-trained nurse counsellors operate this service. They provide information, emotional and psychological support, counselling and linkage to health, welfare and cancer support services for people affected by cancer.

Each contact with the nurse counsellor is private, confidential and anonymous. They do not give medical advice and treatment recommendations but can assist in clarifying

your doubts and putting into perspective the information you may have received from your own treating doctor. There are some things only your doctor can tell you, as he or she knows your condition best.

However, the nurse counsellors can discuss with you issues on coping with your condition and help you find ways to manage your daily activities the best way possible. They are able to speak with you in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Q. How should I care for myself during radiation therapy?

A. Get plenty of rest. Many patients experience fatigue, so it is important you are well rested. Eat a balanced, nutritious diet. Do not attempt to lose weight as you need more calories due to your cancer and treatment. Treat the skin that is exposed to radiation treatment with extra care. Follow the advice from your doctor, radiation therapist and nurse. As there are also many demands that you must cope with, seek out emotional support. At times, it may help to talk out your feelings with a close friend or relative, a counsellor or a member of your healthcare team. Joining a support and interacting with others who have gone through the cancer experience can also help you to cope better.

### Q. What are the long-term effects after radiation therapy?

A. Long-term side effects are not common. However in some situations, there may be a possibility of some long-term effects with radiation therapy. Speak with your doctor about your concerns, as each person's reaction to treatment is different.

### Q. Will I be radioactive after treatment?

A. You will not become radioactive after treatment. Once the external beam therapy is stopped, there will not be any more radiation in your body. Similarly, during internal radiation therapy, you will be treated in a special room. Once the radioactive material is removed, there is no radiation in your body. It is very safe for you to be with your family and friends and even with children. You can continue to have meals and enjoy other activities with them.

### Q. Can I continue to take other medications while I am on radiation therapy?

A. If you are on regular medication such as steroids, anti-hypertensives, anti-convulsions for fits or any others, please inform your treating doctor. He or she will advise you whether to continue, reduce the dose or to stop the medication. Always ask your radiation therapist or your doctor if you are not sure. It is important not to start on any home remedies or use any medication without your doctor's approval.



## USEFUL CONTACT DETAILS

### NATIONAL CANCER CENTRE

Therapeutic Radiology Department, NCC,  
Basement 2

Enquiry line : 6436 8058

Appointments : 6436 8181

### Therapeutic Radiology Department at SGH

Blk 2 Basement 1

Enquiry lines : 6321 4210 / 6326 5147

Appointments : 6321 4211

Appointment Scheduling: 6436 8088

Email : [nccappt@nccs.com.sg](mailto:nccappt@nccs.com.sg)

Billing Enquiries : 6436 8135

Cancer Helpline : 6225 5655

Email : [cancerhelpline@nccs.com.sg](mailto:cancerhelpline@nccs.com.sg)

Foreign Patient Service: (65) 6236 9433

Email : [foreign\\_patient@nccs.com.sg](mailto:foreign_patient@nccs.com.sg)

General Enquiries : 6436 8000

Pharmacy Helpdesk : 6436 8282

### BREAST CANCER FOUNDATION:

General Enquiries : 6356 0123

Expat Helpline : 6352 5400

Email : [enquiries@bcf.org.sg](mailto:enquiries@bcf.org.sg)

### SINGAPORE CANCER SOCIETY:

General line : 6221 9578

Email : [enquiry@singaporecancersociety.org.sg](mailto:enquiry@singaporecancersociety.org.sg)

## INTERNET RESOURCES

### American Cancer Society (ACS)

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

### Abraham Cancer Centre of the University of Pennsylvania

[www.oncolink.upenn.edu/specialty/rad\\_onc/support](http://www.oncolink.upenn.edu/specialty/rad_onc/support)

[www.oncolink.upenn.edu/treatment/](http://www.oncolink.upenn.edu/treatment/)

### British Association of Cancer United Patients (BACUP)

[www.cancerbackup.org.uk/Treatments/Radiotherapy/Generalinformation](http://www.cancerbackup.org.uk/Treatments/Radiotherapy/Generalinformation)

### Cancer Council of Victoria, Australia (CCV)

[www.cancervic.org.au/about-cancer/types-treatments-trials/cancer\\_treatment\\_and\\_side\\_effects/radiotherapy](http://www.cancervic.org.au/about-cancer/types-treatments-trials/cancer_treatment_and_side_effects/radiotherapy)

### National Cancer Institute, USA (NCI)

[www.cancernet.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics](http://www.cancernet.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics)

### National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS)

[www.nccs.com.sg](http://www.nccs.com.sg)



For more information on cancer, call the  
**Cancer Helpline** on 6225 5655 or  
email : [cancerhelpline@nccs.com.sg](mailto:cancerhelpline@nccs.com.sg)

Monday – Friday : 8.30am to 5.30pm  
Saturday, Sunday & Public Holiday : Closed

This is a public education initiative by:

**Cancer Education & Information Service**

Division of Medical Affairs

National Cancer Centre

11 Hospital Drive

Singapore 169610

Reg No: 199801562Z