Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

About Radiation Therapy to Your Head and Neck

This information will help you get ready for radiation therapy to your head and neck at MSK. It explains what to expect. It also explains how to care for yourself before, during, and after your radiation therapy.

This resource has a lot of information. Different sections may be helpful at different times. We suggest reading through this resource once before you start radiation therapy, so you know what to expect. Then, refer back to it during your radiation therapy.

This information is general. Your radiation therapy team will design a treatment and care plan just for you. Because of that, some parts of your treatment may be different than what's described here. Your radiation therapy team will talk with you about what to expect.

About radiation therapy

Radiation therapy uses high-energy radiation to treat cancer. It works by damaging the cancer cells, making it hard for them to multiply. Your body can then naturally get rid of the damaged cancer cells. Radiation therapy also affects normal cells, but they can fix themselves in a way cancer cells can't.

Radiation therapy takes time to work. It takes days or weeks of treatment before cancer cells start to die. They keep dying for weeks or months after radiation therapy ends.

You can have radiation therapy before, during, or after surgery or

chemotherapy (chemo).

About external beam radiation therapy

You'll have a type of radiation therapy called external beam radiation therapy. During your treatments, a machine will aim beams of radiation directly at the tumor. The beams will pass through your body and destroy cancer cells in their path. You will not see or feel the radiation.

Here's a picture of the structures in your head and neck (see Figure 1). Your nurse will show you what area will be treated.

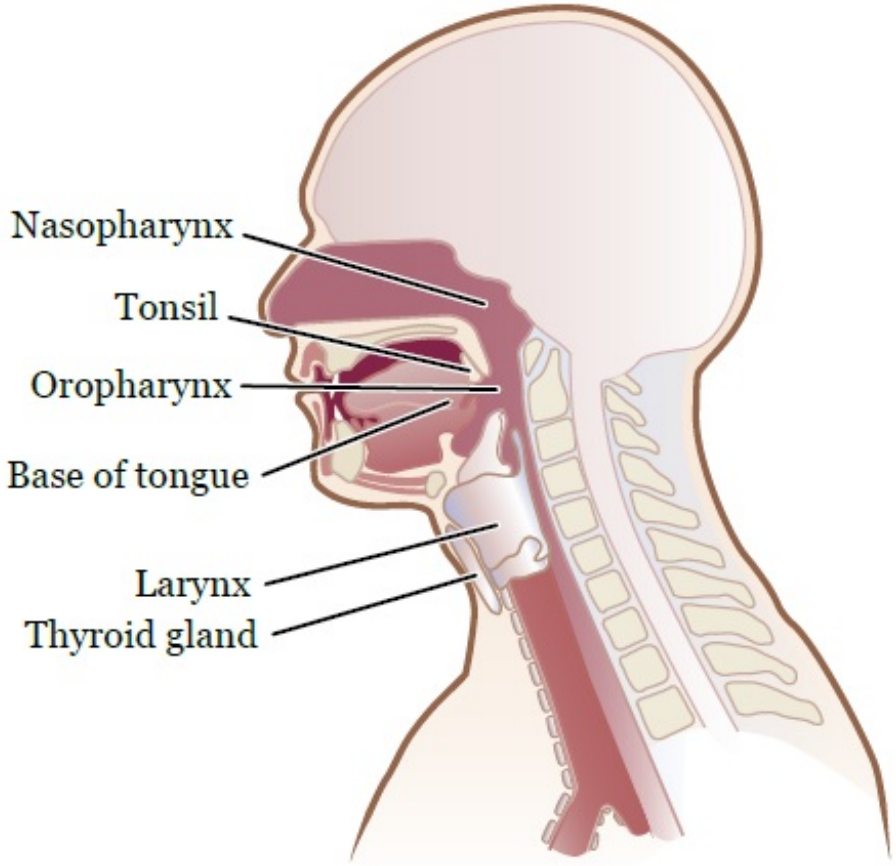

Figure 1. Your head and neck

Your radiation therapy care team

You'll have a team of healthcare providers working together to care for you.

- Your **radiation oncologist** is the doctor who will plan your radiation therapy.
- Your **medical oncologist** is the doctor who will manage your care with your radiation oncologist during and after your treatment.

- Your **radiation therapists** will give your radiation treatments based on the radiation treatment plan your radiation oncologist prescribes.
- Your **radiation oncology nurse** will work with the other members of your radiation therapy team to care for you and your family during your treatments. They will check how you're doing and give you information about your treatment and the side effects you may have. They will also teach you how to manage these side effects and support you during your treatment.
- Your **dentist** will check your teeth and explain how radiation will affect your mouth. You must see your dentist before your simulation. Read the "Simulation" section for more information.
    - Your dentist will check your teeth for problems and do any dental work that's needed. They will also prescribe special toothpaste that has fluoride to help prevent cavities.
    - If you have a lot of fillings in your teeth, your dentist may make a rubber mouth guard for you. It fits over your teeth to keep the metal in the fillings from irritating your mouth. The mouth guard must be made before your simulation. You will need to pick it up from your dentist and bring it to your simulation.
- Your **swallowing specialist** will check to see how well you can swallow. Swallowing can become difficult during treatment. Your swallowing specialist will teach you exercises to keep your swallowing muscles strong.
- Your **clinical dietitian-nutritionist** will help you choose what to eat and drink during your treatment. You will need foods that are high in protein and easy to swallow. Your dietitian will contact you during the first 2 weeks of your treatment.
- If you smoke, you will meet with a **Tobacco Treatment Specialist** from our Tobacco Treatment Program. Smoking is a risk factor for head and neck cancer. If you smoke now, it's important for you to stop. Your nurse can schedule this appointment for you, or you can reach the Tobacco Treatment Program by calling 212-610-0507.
- You may also see other healthcare providers (such as social workers) during

and after your treatment. If you need to see any other healthcare providers, your radiation therapy team will explain why and help you schedule the appointment.

Before your treatment starts, you will have appointments with the providers on your radiation therapy team so they can plan your care. They will talk with you and help you get ready for your treatment. You will also have appointments with many of these providers during and after your treatment.

Your role on your radiation therapy team

Your radiation therapy care team will work together to care for you. You're a part of that team, and your role includes:

- Getting to your appointments on time.
- Asking questions and talking about your concerns.
- Telling us when you have side effects.
- Telling us if you're in pain.
- Caring for yourself at home by:
  - Quitting smoking if you smoke. MSK has specialists who can help. To learn more about our Tobacco Treatment Program, call 212-610-0507. You can also ask your nurse about the program.
  - Caring for your skin based on our instructions.
  - Drinking liquids based on our instructions.
  - Eating or avoiding the foods and drinks we suggest.
  - Staying around the same weight.

What happens before radiation therapy to your head and neck

Simulation appointment

You'll have a treatment planning procedure called a simulation before you start your radiation treatments. Your radiation therapists will take imaging scans during your simulation. They'll also make you a mesh mask that covers your face and upper body. The imaging scans and mask help to:

- Map your treatment site.
- Make sure you get the right dose (amount) of radiation.
- Limit the amount of radiation that gets to nearby healthy tissues.

Your simulation appointment will take about 1 to 4 hours. It may be shorter or longer based on your treatment plan. Your care team will tell you what to expect.

Positron emission tomography-computed tomography (PET-CT) scan

Some people have a PET-CT scan during their simulation. If you are, your nurse will give you detailed instructions for getting ready for the scan.

Sometimes, PET-CT scans use intravenous (IV) contrast. IV contrast is a dye that's put into your bloodstream to make the images clearer. Some people are allergic to IV contrast. If you are, tell your nurse. They will tell you what to do.

If you're having a PET-CT scan, do not eat or drink anything except water for 6 hours before your appointment time. This includes gum, hard candy, cough drops, and mints. If you have anything except water, we may need to reschedule your PET-CT scan.

Medicines to take

You'll be lying still in one position for a long time during your simulation. If you think you'll be uncomfortable, talk with your healthcare provider ahead of time. You can also take an over-the-counter pain medicine or your usual pain medicine 1 hour before your simulation.

Talk with your healthcare provider ahead of time if you think you may get anxious during your simulation. They may suggest medicines to help.

What to eat and drink

Your healthcare provider will tell you if you need to follow special instructions for eating or drinking before your simulation. If you don't need to follow special instructions, you can eat and drink like usual on the day of your simulation.

What to wear

Wear comfortable clothes that are easy to take off. You may need to change into a hospital gown for your simulation.

Do not wear jewelry, powder, lotion, or cream unless a member of your care team says it's OK.

Take devices off your skin

You may wear certain devices on your skin. Before your simulation or treatment, some device makers recommend you take off your:

- Continuous glucose monitor (CGM)
- Insulin pump

If you use one of these, ask your radiation oncologist if you need to take it off. If you do, make sure to bring an extra device to put on after your simulation or treatment.

You may not be sure how to manage your glucose (blood sugar) while your device is off. If so, before your appointment, talk with the healthcare provider who manages your diabetes care.

What to bring

If your dentist made mouth guards for you, bring them to your simulation.

Leave any valuable items you don't need at home. Examples include extra credit cards, extra cash, and jewelry.

What to expect when you arrive

A member of your radiation therapy team will check you in when you arrive. They'll give you an identification (ID) wristband with your name and date of birth. During your appointment, many staff members will check your ID wristband and ask you to say and spell your name and date of birth. This is for your safety. People with the same or a similar name may be getting care on the same day.

Your radiation therapists will review what to expect during the simulation. If you haven't already signed a consent form, they will go over the form with you. They will answer any questions you have and ask for your signature.

You'll undress from the waist up and change into a hospital gown when it's time for your simulation. Keep your shoes on.

If you wear any of these, you may need to take them off:

- A head covering, such as a wig, turban, or cap.
- Dentures.
- A hearing aid.

What to expect during your simulation

Your radiation therapists will help you onto the simulation table. The table will have a sheet on it, but it's hard and does not have a cushion. If you have not taken pain medicine and think you might need it, tell your radiation therapists before your simulation starts.

Your radiation therapists will help you get into position for your simulation. You'll lie on your back during your simulation and treatments. You will see red or green laser lights on the walls. Your radiation therapists use these as a guide

when they position you on the table.

Your simulation will take about 1 to 4 hours but can be shorter or longer depending on your specific treatment plan. Your radiation therapists can play music for you to help pass the time.

Do not move once your simulation starts. It's important that you stay in the same position. Tell your radiation therapists if you feel uncomfortable or need help.

Immobilization device

To help you stay in the same position for each treatment, you will wear a mask that covers your face and upper body and attaches to the table (see Figure 2). You will wear the mask during your simulation and each of your treatments.

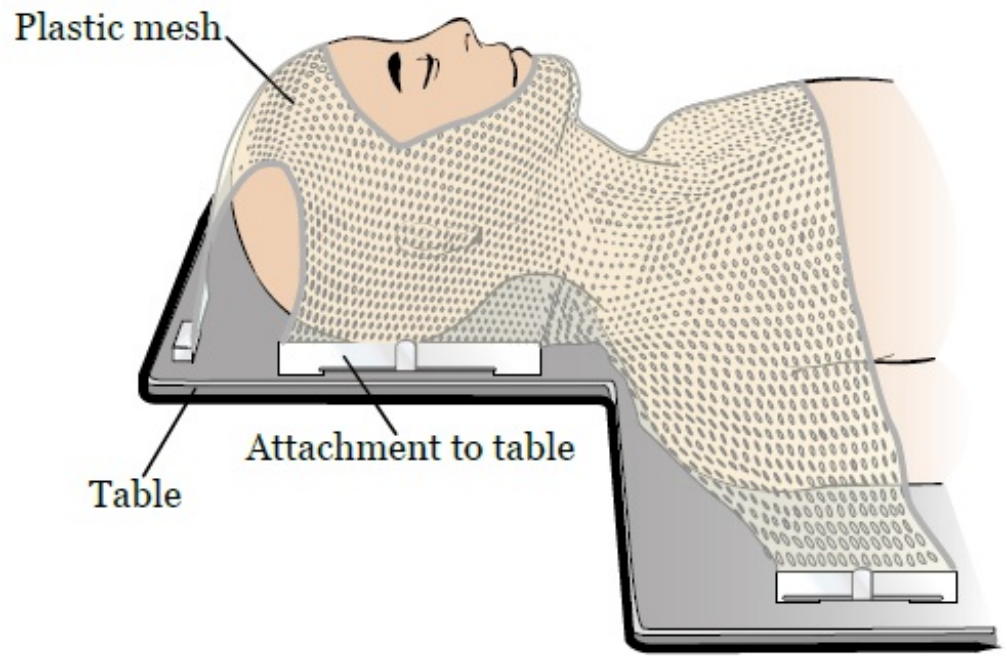

Figure 2. Mask on your face and upper body

To make the mask, your radiation therapists will place a warm sheet of plastic mesh over your face and upper body while you're lying on the simulation table. The mesh has openings for your eyes, nose, and mouth. You will not have any trouble seeing or breathing while it's over your face.

As the mesh cools, it will harden. This takes about 15 minutes. As the mesh is cooling, your radiation therapists will shape it to your face and upper body. You

will feel some pressure as they do this. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, tell your radiation therapists.

Depending on your treatment area, you may also use a foam bite block during your simulation and treatments. The bite block will help you keep from swallowing.

If your dentist made mouth guards for you, you will also wear these during your simulation and each treatment.

Imaging scans

You will have imaging scans while you're in your treatment position and wearing your mask. **These scans are only to plan your treatments. They are not for diagnosis or to find tumors.** For that reason, you will not see any scan results in MSK MyChart (your patient portal).

You will have 1 or more of these scans:

- **Computed tomography (CT) scan**. If you're having a CT scan, your nurse may place an IV line in one of your veins before the scan. It will be used to give you IV contrast before the scan. The contrast allows us to get clear images of the treatment area.
- **PET scan**. If you're having a PET scan, your nurse will give you separate instructions. Please follow them carefully.
- **Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan**. If you're having a MRI scan, your nurse will give you separate instructions. Please follow them carefully.

If you need other imaging scans, your nurse will give you more information.

You'll feel the simulation table move into and out of the scanner and hear the scanner turn on and off. Even if it seems loud, your radiation therapists will be able to hear you if you need to speak with them. They will walk in and out of the room during the scans, but the room has a microphone, speaker, and camera. Someone will always be able to see and hear you.

Skin markings

While you're lying in your treatment position, your radiation therapists will draw on your skin with a felt marker. You can wash off the felt markings after your simulation.

After the marks are made, your radiation therapists will take photographs of you in your treatment position. The photographs and markings will be used to position you correctly on the table each day of your treatment.

Scheduling your treatments

We will schedule your set-up procedure and first treatment at the end of your simulation appointment.

You will have radiation treatments every day (Monday through Friday). Your care team will tell you how many days or weeks you'll get treatments.

You may get chemo and radiation treatments on the same day. It's safe to get chemo before or after your radiation treatment.

Your therapist will ask you what time of day you would like to have your treatments. We will try to give you the time you like. However, we need a 2-hour window, because the time you prefer may not be open. We will move you to that time slot once it opens up. Please know that we will do our best to give you the appointment time you want as soon as we can.

Call your radiation oncologist's office to tell your care team if you can't come in for treatment for any reason. Talk with your radiation therapist or scheduler if you need to change your schedule for any reason.

Checking your treatment schedule

You can see your treatment schedule in your patient portal, MSK MyChart. If you do not have a MSK MyChart account, you can sign up at mskmychart.mskcc.org. You can also ask a member of your care team to send you an invitation.

It's very helpful to use MSK MyChart to keep track of your appointment times. We will call you if we need to reschedule any of your treatment appointments.

Treatment planning

Between your simulation and first treatment, your radiation oncologist will work with a team to plan your treatments. They will use your simulation scans to plan the angles and shapes of your radiation beams. They will also determine the dose of radiation you'll get. They carefully plan and check all the details of your treatments. This takes between 5 days and 2 weeks.

What happens during radiation therapy to your head and neck

You'll be in the same position for your radiation treatments as you were for your simulation. You may want to take pain or anxiety medicine before your radiation treatments if it was helpful for your simulation. Take it about 1 hour before your appointment.

Your treatment appointments

Each day you have treatment, check in at the reception desk and have a seat in the waiting room. Your radiation therapists will ask you to change into a hospital gown when they're ready for you. Keep your shoes on.

Your radiation therapists will bring you into the treatment room and help you lie on the treatment table. They will position you exactly how you were lying during your simulation. They'll put your mask over your face and upper body. They'll also make sure your bite block or mouth guards are in place, if you're using them.

Set-up procedure and first treatment

When you come for your first treatment appointment, you'll have imaging scans before your treatment starts. These scans are called the set-up procedure. They usually take about 40 minutes.

Radiation treatments

Your radiation therapists will do their best to make sure you're comfortable in your treatment position. Once everything is ready, they'll leave the room and start your treatment.

Breathe normally during your treatment, but don't move. You will not see or feel the radiation. You may hear the machine as it moves around you and is turned on and off.

You will be alone in the room during your treatment, but your radiation therapists will see you on a monitor and hear you through an intercom the

whole time. Tell them if you're uncomfortable or need help.

You will be in the treatment room for about 20 to 30 minutes, depending on your treatment plan. You'll spend most of this time getting into your treatment position. The actual treatment only takes a few minutes.

You will not be radioactive during or after your radiation treatments. It is safe for you to be around other people and pets.

Status check visits

Your radiation oncologist or a radiation nurse will check in with you each week during your radiation therapy. They'll talk with you about any concerns, ask about any side effects you're having, and answer your questions. This status check visit may be a video visit or an in-person visit before or after your treatment.

Call your radiation oncologist's office if you need to speak with your radiation oncologist or radiation nurse outside your status check visit. You can also ask another member of your radiation care team to contact them when you come in for treatment.

Vitamins and dietary supplements during radiation therapy

Vitamins, minerals, and herbal or botanical (plant-based) supplements are examples of dietary supplements.

It's OK to take a multivitamin during your radiation therapy. Do not take any other dietary supplements without talking with a member of your care team.

Side effects of radiation therapy to your head and neck

Some people have side effects from radiation therapy to their head and neck. Your nurse will talk with you about the side effects you're most likely to have.

This section has information about the most common side effects. You may have all, some, or none of these side effects. The ones you have and how strong they are depends on many things, such as:

- The exact area of your body being treated.
- The dose of radiation you're getting.
- The number of radiation treatments you're getting.
- Your overall health.

The side effects may be worse if you're also getting chemotherapy.

You may start to notice side effects about 2 weeks after you start treatment. They may get worse during treatment, but they will slowly get better over 6 to 8 weeks after you finish treatment. Some side effects may take longer to go away.

You and your radiation therapy care team will work together to prevent and manage side effects. Follow the guidelines in this section to help manage your side effects during and after treatment.

Changes to your mouth and throat

Your treatments will cause changes in your mouth and throat. You may have:

- Mouth sores
- Mouth pain
- Throat sores
- Throat pain

- Pain when you swallow
- Trouble swallowing
- Thicker saliva than usual
- Dry mouth
- Taste changes

Follow the guidelines below to help manage these side effects.

- Brush your teeth after you eat and before you go to bed. Use a soft-bristle toothbrush and the toothpaste your dentist recommended or a mild toothpaste that has fluoride.
- If you have dentures, a bridge, or a dental prosthesis, take it out and clean it each time you clean your mouth. Leave it out while you sleep. If your mouth becomes irritated, keep it out of your mouth as much as you can.
- If you currently floss your teeth, keep flossing once a day before you go to bed. If you haven't flossed in the past, don't start during your treatment.
- Rinse your mouth every 4 to 6 hours, or more often for comfort. Use 1 of the following liquids:
    - One quart (4 cups) of water mixed with 1 teaspoon of salt and 1 teaspoon of baking soda
    - One quart of water mixed with 1 teaspoon of salt
    - One quart of water mixed with 1 teaspoon of baking soda
    - Water
    - A mouthwash with no alcohol or sugar

    To rinse, swish and gargle the liquid for 15 to 30 seconds, then spit it out.
- Use a lip moisturizer after you care for your mouth. Don't apply it 4 hours before your treatment.

If your mouth is dry, try the suggestions below.

- Use a mouth moisturizer.
- Take sips of water or other liquids (such as coconut water, almond milk, Gatorade®, and broth) often during the day. It may be helpful to carry a bottle of water.
- Use an aerosol pump spray bottle filled with water to moisten your mouth.
- Use a humidifier, especially at night. Be sure to change the water in the humidifier and clean it as directed.
- Avoid using air conditioners.

If you start having trouble swallowing or pain when you swallow, tell your doctor or nurse. They can prescribe medicine to make you more comfortable.

As side effects develop, your doctor may ask you to see your nurse every day.

Changes inside your nose

Your treatments may cause changes inside your nose, such as dryness, stuffiness, occasional minor nosebleeds, or all 3.

To help manage these side effects, keep the inside of your nose moist. You can do this by using saline nose spray, a humidifier, or both.

Ear pain

You may have ear pain from the swelling caused by your treatments. If you do, tell your doctor or nurse. Ear pain can also be a sign of infection.

Don’t try to clean or clear out your ears. Don’t use cotton swabs (Q-tips®) inside your ears.

Voice changes (hoarseness)

You may have hoarseness from the swelling caused by your treatments. Your voice may be more breathy, strained, rough, or high or low pitched. To help manage voice changes:

- Rest your voice as much as you can.

- Don’t whisper. This can cause strain on your vocal cords.
- Use a humidifier.
- Gargle with one of the liquids listed in the “Changes to your mouth and throat” section.

Skin and hair reactions

Your skin and hair in the treatment area may change during your radiation therapy. This is normal.

- Your skin may become pink or tanned after 2 to 3 weeks. It may become bright red or very dark later on, based on your skin tone.
- Your skin may feel dry and itchy and look flaky. Sensitive areas may blister, open, and peel. Tell a member of your care team if this happens.
- You may get a rash, especially in areas where your skin has been in the sun. **Tell a member of your care team if you get a rash.** They can be a sign of an infection.
- You may lose some or all of your hair in the treatment area. Hair most often grows back 3 to 6 months after you finish radiation therapy.

Your radiation nurse may put special dressings or creams on your skin. They will also teach you how to care for your skin on your own. If your skin reactions are very bad, your radiation oncologist may stop your treatments until your skin heals.

Skin reactions sometimes get worse during the week after your last treatment. Call your radiation oncologist or nurse if this happens. Your skin will heal over time once you finish radiation therapy, but it often takes 3 to 4 weeks.

These guidelines can help you care for your skin during your radiation therapy. Follow them until your skin gets better. **These guidelines are only for your skin in the radiation treatment area.** You can care for the rest of your skin as usual.

Keep your skin clean

- Bathe or shower every day.
  - Use warm water and a mild unscented soap, such as Neutrogena®, Dove®, baby soap, Basis®, or Cetaphil®.
  - Be gentle with your skin when you wash it. Do not use a washcloth, loofah, or brush.
  - Rinse your skin well.
  - Pat your skin dry with a soft, clean towel.
- Your radiation therapists may outline your treatment area with a purple felt-tipped marker. You can remove these markings with mineral oil when your radiation therapists say it's OK.
- Do not use alcohol or alcohol pads on your skin.

Keep your skin moisturized

- Moisturize your skin 2 times every day.
- Use a moisturizer without fragrances or lanolin. Lanolin is an oil made by animals that have wool, such as sheep. It can make your skin more sensitive.
  - There are many over-the-counter (not prescription) moisturizers that are good to use. Your radiation nurse may suggest one. Ask them if you're not sure which one to use.
- Only use 1 moisturizer at a time unless your radiation nurse tells you to use more.

Avoid irritating your skin

- Wear loose-fitting cotton clothing. Do not wear tight clothing that will rub against your skin.
- Only use the moisturizers, creams, or lotions your radiation oncologist or nurse suggests.
- Do not use makeup, perfume, cologne, powder, or aftershave.

- Do not use deodorant if your skin is broken, cracked, or irritated. You can use deodorant on intact (not broken) skin. Stop using it if your skin becomes irritated.
- Do not scratch your skin if it's itchy. Put on moisturizer. Ask your radiation nurse about ways to ease the itching.
- Avoid shaving your skin. If you must shave, use an electric razor. Stop if your skin becomes irritated.
- Do not put anything sticky (such as Band-Aids® or medical tape) on your skin.
- Do not expose your skin to very hot or cold temperatures. For example, do not use hot tubs, hot or cold water bottles, heating pads, or ice packs.
- Only swim in a pool if you do not have any skin reactions. Rinse off right after you get out.
- Avoid tanning or burning your skin. Use a sunblock with an SPF of 30 or higher if you're going to be in the sun. Wear loose-fitting clothing over as much of your skin as you can.

Difficulty eating and drinking

Many side effects of radiation therapy to your head and neck can make it hard to eat and drink. This can cause weight loss, fatigue (having less energy than usual), and dehydration.

If your weight changes, the mask used during your treatment may not fit correctly. This can make it harder to stay in the correct position for your treatments. Follow the guidelines below to help keep your weight from changing.

Change what you eat and drink based on your side effects

If you have throat or mouth pain or soreness or trouble swallowing

- Eat soft, moist, bland foods. Take small bites and chew the food well.
- Use sauces and gravies to soften foods.
- Avoid things that may irritate your mouth and throat, such as:

    - Very hot foods and liquids.
    - Dry, hard, and coarse foods, such as chips, pretzels, crackers, and raw vegetables. Only have these if they don't cause mouth pain or soreness.
    - Spices, such as pepper, chili, horseradish, hot sauce, and curry.
    - Acidic or citrus foods and juices, such as orange, grapefruit, lemon, lime, pineapple, and tomato.
    - Alcohol.
    - Tobacco.
- Blend or purée your foods to change the texture.

If your mouth is dry

- Rinse your mouth before eating.
- Use gravies and sauces to make your food.
- Drink liquids while eating dry foods such as rice or bread.

If you have appetite loss

- Eat small, frequent meals throughout the day. If you never seem to feel hungry, set up a schedule to make sure you eat regularly.
- Choose foods and drinks that are high in calories and protein. Avoid foods and drinks that are filling but don't have many calories or protein.
- Eat your meals in a calm place. Take your time while eating. Eat with family or friends whenever possible.
- Bring snacks and drinks to your treatments. You can have them while you're waiting or while you're coming to and from your appointments each day.

If you have nausea

- Tell your doctor or nurse. They may prescribe medicine to help.
- Eat foods that are less likely to upset your stomach, such as:
    - Foods at room temperature or cooler.

- Liquids that are cooled or chilled.
- Dry, starchy foods, such as toast, soda crackers, melba toast, dry cereal, pretzels, and angel food cake.
- Yogurt, sherbet, and clear liquids such as apple juice, Jell-O ®, and ginger ale.
- Cold chicken or turkey, baked or broiled, with the skin removed.
- Soft fruits and vegetables.

- Avoid foods and liquids that may make nausea worse, such as:
  - Hot foods with strong odors (smells).
  - Spicy, fatty, greasy, and fried foods.
  - Very sweet foods.
  - Acidic or citrus foods and juices, such as orange, grapefruit, pineapple, and tomato juices.
  - Alcohol.

Get enough nutrition during your treatment

- Eat a well-balanced diet that's high in calories and protein. This will help you maintain your weight and feel better during treatment. Your dietitian will work with you to help you choose the best foods and liquids.
- Use liquid nutritional supplements. There are many different products and flavors you can try. Talk with your doctor, nurse, or dietitian about which one is best for you.
- If you want, you can take a daily multivitamin.
  - Read the multivitamin's label. Don't take more than the recommended daily amount of any vitamins or minerals.
  - Don't take any other dietary supplements (such as vitamins and herbal supplements) without talking with your doctor.

To learn more about eating during treatment, read *Eating Well During Your Cancer Treatment* (www.mskcc.org/pe/eating-cancer-treatment).

To learn about getting enough nutrition before, during, and after radiation therapy to the head and neck, watch *Nutrition Before and During Treatment for Head and Neck Cancer* (www.mskcc.org/pe/hn-nutrition-before-radiation).

Fatigue

Fatigue is feeling very tired or weak. When you feel fatigued, you may not want to do things. You may have trouble focusing, feel slowed down, or have less energy than usual. Fatigue can range from mild (not bad) to severe (very bad). It may be worse at certain times of day.

You may start to feel fatigued after 2 to 3 weeks of treatments. You may still feel fatigued for a few weeks to several months after finishing radiation therapy. Fatigue usually gets better over time.

There are lots of reasons you may feel fatigued during your radiation therapy. They include:

- The radiation's effects on your body.
- Traveling to and from your treatment appointments.
- Not getting enough restful sleep at night.
- Not getting enough protein and calories.
- Having pain or other symptoms.
- Feeling anxious (nervous) or depressed (unhappy).
- Side effects of some medicines.

Ways to manage fatigue

- If you're working and are feeling well, it's OK to keep working. But working less may help you have more energy.
- Plan your daily activities. Pick the things you need or really want to do. Do them when you have the most energy. For example, you may choose to go to work but not do housework. You may choose to watch your child's after-school event but not go out to dinner.

- Plan time to rest or take short (10- to 15-minute) naps during the day, especially when you feel more tired.
- Try to sleep at least 8 hours every night. This may be more sleep than you needed before you started radiation therapy. You may find it helpful to:
  - Go to sleep earlier and get up later.
  - Be active during the day. For example, if you're able to exercise, you could go for a walk or do yoga.
  - Relax before going to bed. For example, read a book, work on a puzzle, listen to music, or do another calming hobby.
- Ask family and friends to help with chores and errands. Check with your health insurance company to see if they cover home care services.
- You might have more energy when you exercise. Ask your radiation oncologist if you can do light exercise, such as walking, biking, stretching, or yoga. Read *Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue with Exercise* (www.mskcc.org/pe/fatigue-exercise) to learn more.
- Eat foods that are high in protein and calories. Read *Eating Well During Your Cancer Treatment* (www.mskcc.org/pe/eating-cancer-treatment) to learn more.

Some things can make your fatigue worse. Examples are:

- Pain
- Nausea (feeling like you're going to throw up)
- Diarrhea (loose or watery poop)
- Trouble sleeping
- Feeling depressed or anxious

Ask your radiation oncologist or nurse for help if you have these or any other symptoms or side effects.

Sexual and reproductive health

You may have concerns about how cancer and your treatment can affect your sex life. You are not radioactive. You can't pass radiation to anyone else. It's safe to be in close contact with others.

You can be sexually active during your radiation therapy, unless your radiation oncologist gives you other instructions. If you or your partner are able to have children, you must use birth control (contraception) to prevent pregnancy during your radiation therapy.

Talking with your radiation oncologist or nurse about your sexual health can be hard, but it's an important conversation to have. They may not bring it up unless you share your questions and concerns. You may feel uncomfortable, but most people in cancer treatment have similar questions. We work hard to make sure everyone in our care feels welcome.

Sexual health programs

MSK offers sexual health programs. These programs can help you manage the ways your cancer or cancer treatment affects your sexual health or fertility. Our specialists can help you address sexual health or fertility issues before, during, or after your radiation therapy.

- To learn about our Female Sexual Medicine & Women's Health Program or to make an appointment, call 646-888-5076.
- To learn about our Male Sexual & Reproductive Medicine Program or to make an appointment, call 646-888-6024.
- To learn about our Cancer and Fertility Program, talk with your healthcare provider.

Other sexual health resources

Read *Sex and Your Cancer Treatment* (www.mskcc.org/pe/sex-cancer-treatment) to learn more about sexual health during cancer treatment.

The American Cancer Society also has information about sexual health issues during cancer treatment. You can find it online at

www.cancer.org/cancer/side-effects/sexual-side-effects or call 800-227-2345 to ask for printed information.

Emotional health

Cancer diagnosis and treatment can be very stressful and overwhelming. You may feel:

• Anxious or nervous • Afraid • Alone • Angry	• Depressed • Helpless • Frustrated	• Numb • Uncertain • Worried

You might also worry about telling your employer you have cancer or about paying your medical bills. You may worry about how your family relationships may change, or that the cancer will come back. You may worry about how cancer treatment will affect your body, or if you will still be sexually attractive.

It's normal and OK to worry about all these things. All these kinds of feelings are normal when you or someone you love has a serious illness. We're here to support you.

Ways to cope with your feelings

Talk with others. When people try to protect each other by hiding their feelings, they can feel very alone. Talking can help the people around you know what you're thinking. It might help to talk about your feelings with someone you trust. For example, you can talk with your spouse or partner, close friend, or family member. You can also talk with a chaplain (spiritual advisor), nurse, social worker, or psychologist.

Join a support group. Meeting other people with cancer will give you a chance to talk about your feelings and learn from others. You can learn how other people cope with their cancer and treatment and be reminded you're not alone.

We know that all cancer diagnoses and people with cancer are not the same. We offer support groups for people who share similar diagnoses or identities. For example, you can join a support group for people with breast cancer or for

LGBTQ+ people with cancer. Visit www.msk.org/vp to learn about MSK's support groups. You can also talk with your radiation oncologist, nurse, or social worker.

Try relaxation and meditation. These kinds of activities can help you feel relaxed and calm. You might try thinking of yourself in a favorite place. While you do, breathe slowly. Pay attention to each breath or listen to soothing music or sounds. For some people, praying is another way of meditation. Visit www.msk.org/meditations to find guided meditations lead by our Integrative Medicine and Wellness providers.

Exercise. Many people find that light movement, such as walking, biking, yoga, or water aerobics, helps them feel better. Talk with your healthcare provider about types of exercise you can do.

We all have our own way of dealing with tough situations. Often, we do what worked for us in the past. But sometimes that's not enough. We encourage you to talk with your doctor, nurse, or social worker about your concerns.

What happens after radiation therapy to your head and neck

Follow-up appointments

It's important to come to all your follow-up appointments with your radiation oncologist. During these appointments, they will check how you're recovering after your radiation therapy.

Write down your questions and concerns before your follow-up appointments. Bring this and a list of all your medicines with you. You can also call your radiation oncologist or nurse any time after you finish radiation therapy or between follow-up appointments.

Vitamins and dietary supplements after radiation therapy

- You might be getting other cancer treatments along with your radiation therapy. If you are, ask the doctor managing that treatment when it's safe to start taking dietary supplements again. Some dietary supplements are not safe to take before surgery or during chemotherapy.
- If you're not getting other cancer treatments, you can start taking dietary supplements again 1 month after your last radiation treatment.

Tell your radiation nurse if you want to talk with a clinical dietitian-nutritionist about your diet or supplements.

Other things to remember

It's important to keep taking good care of yourself even after your treatment is finished. Here are a few key things to remember:

- Side effects of treatment will slowly go away over 4 to 8 weeks after your treatment is completed. Some side effects may take longer to go away. Keep following the guidelines in the "Side effects of treatment" section for as long as you have side effects.
- Take special care of your mouth for the rest of your life.

    - Have regular dental follow-up appointments. See your dentist if your denture or appliance isn't fitting well.
    - Talk with your radiation oncologist before you have teeth pulled or get dental implants. If you need to have any teeth pulled, have them pulled by a dentist with experience treating people who have had radiation therapy to their head and neck. Call your radiation oncologist for a referral if you need one.
    - Keep using the fluoride toothpaste recommended by your dentist.
    - Avoid sweet, sticky foods. They can increase your risk of developing cavities.
- Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet and take a daily multivitamin, if you choose to.
    - If you're following a special diet because you have difficulty swallowing, ask your swallowing specialist how to go back to your usual diet.
    - If you're losing weight or can't gain weight, ask your dietitian how to get more protein and calories.
    - Avoid drinking alcohol.
- If you're taking pain medicine, ask your nurse for instructions on how to gradually reduce the dose.

When to call your healthcare provider

Call your radiation oncologist or nurse if you have:

- A fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.
- Chills.
- Painful, peeling, blistering, moist, or weepy skin.
- Discomfort in the treated area.
- Nausea or vomiting that keeps you from eating or drinking anything for 24 hours.
- Constipation that doesn't get better after you take medicine.
- Pain that doesn't get better after you take medicine.

Contact information

If you have questions or concerns, contact a member of your radiation therapy team. You can reach them at the numbers below.

Radiation oncologist: _____
Phone number: _____

Radiation nurse: _____
Phone number: _____

A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

Support services

MSK support services

Counseling Center

www.msk.org/counseling
646-888-0200
Many people find that counseling helps them. Our counseling center offers counseling for individuals, couples, families, and groups. We can also prescribe medicines to help if you feel anxious or depressed. Ask your healthcare provider for a referral or call the number above to make an appointment.

Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service

www.msk.org/integrative-medicine
Our Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service offers many services to complement (go along with) traditional medical care, including music therapy, mind/body therapies, dance and movement therapy, yoga, and touch therapy. Call 646-449-1010 to schedule an appointment for these services.

You can also schedule a consultation with a healthcare provider in the Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service. They will work with you to come up with a plan for creating a healthy lifestyle and managing side effects. Call 646-608-8550 to make an appointment.

Nutrition Services

www.msk.org/nutrition
212-639-7312
Our Nutrition Service offers nutritional counseling with one of our clinical dietitian nutritionists. Your clinical dietitian nutritionist will talk with you about your eating habits. They can also give advice on what to eat during and after treatment. Ask a member of your care team for a referral or call the number above to make an appointment.

Rehabilitation Services

www.msk.org/rehabilitation
Cancers and cancer treatments can make your body feel weak, stiff, or tight.

Some can cause lymphedema (swelling). Our physiatrists (rehabilitation medicine doctors), occupational therapists (OTs), and physical therapists (PTs) can help you get back to your usual activities.

- **Rehabilitation medicine doctors** diagnose and treat problems that affect how you move and do activities. They can design and help coordinate your rehabilitation therapy program, either at MSK or somewhere closer to home. call Rehabilitation Medicine (Physiatry) at 646-888-1929 to learn more.
- An **OT** can help if you're having trouble doing usual daily activities. For example, they can recommend tools to help make daily tasks easier. A **PT** can teach you exercises to help build strength and flexibility. Call Rehabilitation Therapy at 646-888-1900 to learn more.

Resources for Life After Cancer (RLAC) Program

646-888-8106
At MSK, care does not end after your treatment. The RLAC Program is for patients and their families who have finished treatment.

This program has many services. We offer seminars, workshops, support groups, and counseling on life after treatment. We can also help with insurance and employment issues.

Sexual Health Programs

Cancer and cancer treatments can affect your sexual health, fertility, or both. MSK's sexual health programs can help you before, during, or after your treatment.

- Our Female Sexual Medicine & Women's Health Program can help with sexual health problems such as premature menopause or fertility issues. Ask a member of your MSK care team for a referral or call 646-888-5076 to learn more.
- Our Male Sexual & Reproductive Medicine Program can help with sexual health problems such as erectile dysfunction (ED). Ask a member of your care team for a referral or call 646-888-6024 to learn more.

Tobacco Treatment Program

www.msk.org/tobacco
212-610-0507
MSK has specialists who can help you quit smoking. Visit our website or call the number above to learn more. You can also ask your nurse about the program.

Virtual Programs
www.msk.org/vp
Our Virtual Programs offer online education and support for patients and caregivers. These are live sessions where you can talk or just listen. You can learn about your diagnosis, what to expect during treatment, and how to prepare for your cancer care.

Sessions are private, free, and led by experts. Visit our website for more information about Virtual Programs or to register.

Radiation therapy support services

American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology
www.rtanswers.org
800-962-7876
This website has detailed information about treating cancer with radiation. It also has contact information for radiation oncologists in your area.

External support services

There are many other support services to help you before, during, and after your cancer treatment. Some offer support groups and information, while others can help with transportation, lodging (a place to stay), and treatment costs.

For a list of these support services, read *External Support Services* (www.mskcc.org/pe/external-support-services). You can also talk with an MSK social worker by calling 212-639-7020.

Questions to ask your radiation oncologist

Before your appointment, it's helpful to write down questions you want to ask. Examples are listed below. Write down the answers during your appointment so you can review them later.

What kind of radiation therapy will I get?

How many radiation treatments will I get?

What side effects should I expect during my radiation therapy?

Will these side effects go away after I finish my radiation therapy?

What kind of late side effects should I expect after my radiation therapy?

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

About Radiation Therapy to Your Head and Neck - Last updated on November 23, 2026
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