

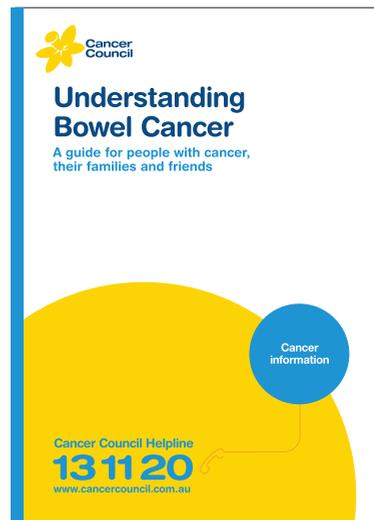
Bowel Cancer

Radiotherapy Treatment

This leaflet is designed to give you information about radiotherapy treatment for bowel cancer and what to expect.

If you have any questions please speak to your Radiation Oncologist or the other helpful staff at William Buckland Radiation Oncology during your next visit.

The Cancer Council of Victoria produces an easy to read bowel cancer information booklet. Copies of the booklet can be found at William Buckland Radiation Oncology or go to their website www.cancervic.org.au.



What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer occurs in any part of the large bowel, mainly the colon and rectum. It is the second most common cancer in Australia, with 14,000 people diagnosed every year.

The most common treatment for bowel cancer is surgery. Radiotherapy is often given in combination with surgery. Chemotherapy may also be included in your treatment plan. Different combinations are used in different situations. Your Radiation Oncologist will discuss these options with you.

Side effects

There are some side effects associated with radiotherapy. Below is a list of the most common side effects associated with radiotherapy to the bowel. Side effects may not be limited to the following, so if you have any concerns please speak to your Radiation Oncologist.

Side effects may also relate to the addition of chemotherapy or surgery in your treatment plan.

Side effects can be divided into two groups:

- Acute - Those which happen during treatment.
- Late - Those which happen after treatment is completed.

Acute side effects

Tiredness

Most people experience tiredness during radiotherapy treatment. This is usually mild and begins 2-3 weeks after treatment starts and continues 2-6 weeks after treatment is finished. If you are also having chemotherapy, it is likely you will experience more tiredness, which will last longer after your treatment is completed.

This is not normally debilitating and in itself should not affect your daily activities or ability to drive. However, you may wish to go to bed earlier or take a rest during the afternoon. We strongly encourage you to continue your regular activities like walking or light exercises.

Bladder Irritation

When pelvic radiation is given, the bladder and urethra may also become irritated such that you might notice urination becomes more frequent, especially at night. Occasionally a mild burning sensation when passing urine may be experienced. Appropriate medications may be given to decrease this problem.

Redness of the skin

You may notice some redness of the skin in the area being treated 2-3 weeks after treatment has started. It may become more prominent towards the end of treatment and can include temporary itching and discomfort.

This reaction in the region of the buttocks and peri-anal area may be more prominent. You will receive instructions from your Radiotherapy Nurse who will supply creams and local dressings as necessary.

Hair loss

Radiotherapy will cause hair loss in the area being treated often two to three weeks after treatment starts. The hair should begin to grow back again within a few weeks to months of the treatment finishing but hair loss can be permanent for some people.

Bowel Irritation

When the pelvic area is treated, there could be a problem with diarrhoea and abdominal cramping. These symptoms are typically improved by appropriate diet and medications as required. A dietician could review you during your radiotherapy treatment if required.

Radiotherapy to the bowel may cause the following problems:

- Urgency - A sudden need to open your bowels.
- Tenesmus - A feeling of repeatedly needing to open the bowels.
- Incontinence - Leakage/soiling.
- Flatus - Wind.
- Passing blood or mucus when you open your bowels.

These symptoms should begin to improve once the radiotherapy has finished. It may take a few months for the bowel to settle down. Most patients will have a permanent change to their bowel habit which is usually mild and will be in part determined by the type of surgery performed.

Contraception

Female

Radiotherapy may cause an early menopause in pre-menopausal patients and if you are no longer producing eggs you will not be able to become pregnant. It usually takes about three months or longer after the radiotherapy finishes to stop producing eggs. During this time it is important to consider contraception.

Male

If you are having radiotherapy treatment, it's safe for you to have sexual intercourse. As you may produce sperm for some time during and after radiotherapy you will need to avoid fathering a child. Some doctors recommend using contraception for six months and others for up to two years after treatment. Sperm produced during or after radiotherapy may still be fertile but damaged, and could cause abnormalities in a child conceived during or soon after pelvic radiotherapy.

Late side effects

Skin

In some cases the skin in this region may appear darker in colour after radiotherapy treatment. Your skin may also become dry, thin, lose its elasticity or may scar. These changes can take many months to resolve and in some cases your skin may never return to its original colour or feel.

Bowel

Faecal incontinence could be one of the potential side effects of radiotherapy to the pelvis. The possibility of this side effect depends on the site of tumour, the type of radiotherapy and surgery. The risk would be higher in a tumour close to anal sphincter and with shorter course radiotherapy.

Chronic diarrhoea or change in bowel habit could happen.

Rare delayed complications of radiotherapy can include bowel obstruction, perforation or adhesions, which may require management and treatment by your Surgeon. This risk is decreased with modern radiotherapy treatment techniques.

Fertility

Radiotherapy might affect fertility and could cause infertility.

Female

After pelvic radiotherapy, for pre-menopausal patients, you will not be able to become pregnant. Before treatment starts some women may wish to see a fertility specialist to discuss the possibility of storing eggs or embryos (fertilised eggs). Please discuss this before your radiotherapy commences with your Radiation Oncologist.

Other side effects of radiotherapy to the pelvis may include: vaginal discomfort with intercourse (dyspareunia) and vaginal dryness, and menopause.

These possibilities will be discussed and specific guidelines given to you during and after radiotherapy by your radiation oncologist and radiotherapy nurse.

Male

If there is a wish to potentially father children you may request to be referred to an andrology or a fertility specialist. This must be discussed before commencement of radiotherapy to arrange referral. For some men, it may be possible for their sperm to be collected before the treatment starts (sperm banking). The sperm can then be stored for potential use in the future.



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WBRO Patient Information Committee 2013. Bowel Cancer - Radiotherapy Treatment.
Victoria: William Buckland Radiation Oncology.

First Published November 2013 This edition November 2013

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