

# **Stomach & Oesophagus Cancer: Radiation therapy treatment**

**Information for patients,  
families and friends**

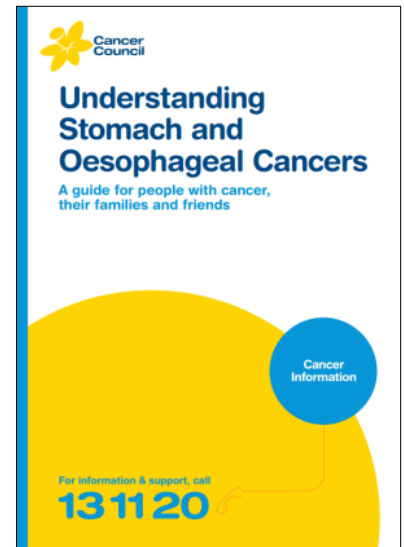


## About this booklet

This booklet is designed to give you information about radiation therapy treatment for stomach and oesophagus cancer and what to expect.

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

The Cancer Council of Victoria produces an easy to read stomach and oesophagus cancer information booklet. Copies of the booklet can be found at Alfred Health Radiation Oncology or go to their website [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au).



## Side effects

Below is a list of the most common side effects associated with radiation therapy to the stomach and oesophagus. Side effects may not be limited to the following, so if you have any concerns please speak to your Radiation Oncologist.

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 radiation therapy 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.

### 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 may include temporary itching and discomfort.

To ease the effects of this skin reaction we suggest shorter less hot showers, mild soaps and avoiding rubbing the irritated areas. You will receive instructions from your radiation therapy nurse who will supply creams as necessary. This may substantially improve two to six weeks after completion of radiation therapy.

In the long term an inexpensive moisturising lotion is recommended for local dryness or itchiness. The treated skin may be more sensitive to sun exposure and we advise wearing clothing or sunscreen over the treated area while spending time outdoors.

## **Difficulty swallowing**

The lining of the oesophagus and stomach may become irritated during treatment. You may have a sensation of a lump in your throat with swallowing and it may be painful. It may be eased with medications. Your dietician may advise modification to softer foods, a liquidised diet and avoiding hot/spicy foods. If you cannot swallow at all you must notify your nurse or your Radiation Oncologist promptly.

## **Loss of Appetite/Nausea/Vomiting**

Many patients experience loss of appetite and/or nausea/sickness. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy can both contribute to this. The end result of these side effects may be weight loss which could be minimised by eating small/frequent meals, dietary advice and additional medications. Should you experience either of these please discuss it with the nurse or Radiation Oncologist.

## **Low Blood Counts**

Radiation therapy and chemotherapy can result in a reduction of blood counts which could result in a higher risk of infection, bruising and bleeding. Please notify your treatment team if you experience these.

## **Hair loss**

Radiation therapy 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.

## **Late side effects**

### **Narrowing of the Oesophagus**

Scarring caused by radiation therapy might result in a narrowing of the oesophagus making it hard to swallow. Sometimes this may need a procedure to stretch the gullet or, very rarely, surgery. It does not necessarily mean the cancer has come back.

### **Breathlessness**

Radiation therapy may leave the lungs with some scarring. Although every effort is made to minimise the radiation dose to the lungs, sometimes you might notice a slight increase in shortness of breath. Please notify a member of your treatment team if you experience any shortness of breath.

## **Rare late side effects**

### **Spinal Cord Injury**

Long-term effects of radiation may be serious and involve inflammation or scarring of the spinal cord. Fortunately, serious complications are unusual and occur in approximately 1 in 1000 patients. It could cause pain, difficulties in power or sensation to the lower body. Every effort is made to plan your treatment carefully to avoid this problem.

### **Other Organ Injury**

If radiation therapy is delivered to the upper abdomen it can cause injury to the stomach and/or small intestine/bowel which can appear like ulcer disease and often responds to stomach ulcer medications. Very rarely there can be an injury to the liver or kidneys. Every effort is made to plan your treatment carefully to avoid these problems.



## **Alfred Health**

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[alfredhealth.org.au](http://alfredhealth.org.au)

## **Further information:**

### **The Alfred**

[alfredhealth.org.au](http://alfredhealth.org.au)

### **Alfred Health Radiation Oncology**

[alfredhealth.ro](http://alfredhealth.ro)

### **Latrobe Regional Hospital**

[lrh.com.au](http://lrh.com.au)

### **Cancer Council Victoria**

[cancervic.org.au](http://cancervic.org.au)

If you would like to provide feedback or request a copy of this information in a different format, contact us at [patient.information@alfred.org.au](mailto:patient.information@alfred.org.au)



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Developed & reviewed  
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