

## **Items to Consider When Going Through Radiation Treatments**

Radiation therapy is a powerful cancer treatment, but it can also cause side effects, particularly to the skin in the treated area and your overall energy levels. To help manage these side effects and ensure the best outcome, there are several things you should generally avoid:

### **I. Skin Care (for the treated area):**

The skin in the treatment area becomes very sensitive and vulnerable. Avoid:

- Harsh soaps, deodorants, perfumes, colognes, aftershaves, and scented lotions/creams: These can contain ingredients (like alcohol or metals) that irritate the skin or interfere with treatment. Use only mild, unscented, pH-balanced soaps (like baby soap) and moisturizers recommended by your care team.
- Rubbing, scrubbing, or scratching: Be extremely gentle when washing and drying the treated skin. Pat it dry instead of rubbing. Keep your nails short to avoid accidental scratching.
- Adhesive tapes or bandages: The adhesive can pull and damage the fragile skin.
- Extreme temperatures (hot or cold): This includes hot tubs, saunas, heating pads, hot water bottles, ice packs, and even very hot or cold showers/baths.
- Sun exposure: The treated skin is highly susceptible to sunburn. Protect it with loose-fitting, sun-protective clothing and use a PABA-free sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher, even on cloudy days and in winter. Avoid direct sun exposure, especially during peak hours (10 am to 4 pm).
- Shaving: If necessary, use an electric razor very gently. Avoid wet shaving.
- Tight-fitting clothing: Wear loose, soft, breathable fabrics like cotton over the treated area to prevent friction and irritation.
- Chemicals: Avoid contact with harsh cleaning products or other chemicals.
- Certain topical products: Some products, like aloe vera, have been shown to potentially worsen skin reactions or be ineffective. Always check with your care team before applying anything to the treated skin.
- Removing treatment marks: Don't scrub off any temporary marks your care team draws on your skin; they are essential for accurate treatment delivery.

### **II. Diet and Nutrition (general guidance, always consult your team):**

Radiation can affect your appetite, digestion, and create specific side effects depending on the treatment area. While individual needs vary, generally avoid:

- Spicy, acidic, and salty foods: These can irritate the mouth, throat, and digestive tract, especially if you have mouth sores or diarrhea. Examples include citrus fruits, tomatoes, hot peppers, and highly salted foods.
- Hard, dry, or crunchy foods: If you have mouth sores or difficulty swallowing (common with head and neck radiation), these can cause pain and further irritation. Examples include raw vegetables, chips, pretzels, and tough meats.
- Highly processed foods: These often lack essential nutrients and can contribute to inflammation. They may also be high in unhealthy fats, sugars, and preservatives.
- Excessive sugar: Limit added sugars in beverages and processed foods.
- Unhealthy (saturated and trans) fats: Focus on healthy fats.
- Alcohol: Alcohol can exacerbate dehydration, mouth dryness, and irritate mucous membranes. It can also interfere with medications. It's generally recommended to limit or avoid alcohol during treatment.
- Caffeine: In some cases, caffeine can worsen dry mouth or diarrhea.
- Raw or undercooked foods (if your immune system is compromised): Due to a potentially weakened immune system, avoid raw fish (sushi), undercooked meats, unpasteurized dairy, and raw sprouts to reduce the risk of foodborne illness. Cook all foods thoroughly.
- Gas-producing foods (if experiencing bloating or diarrhea): These can include certain vegetables (broccoli, cabbage, beans), carbonated drinks, and sugar-free candies containing sorbitol.
- New or unapproved supplements: Always discuss any vitamins, herbal remedies, or dietary supplements with your oncology team. Some can interfere with radiation treatment or cause adverse effects. Antioxidant supplements, in particular, should often be avoided as they may protect cancer cells from the radiation.

### III. Activities and Lifestyle:

- Strenuous activities: While light exercise is often encouraged, avoid overexertion or activities that might irritate the treated area. Listen to your body and rest when you feel tired.
- Smoking and tobacco use: These significantly worsen side effects and hinder healing.

- Being overly stressed: While difficult, managing stress can support your overall well-being.
- Missing appointments: Consistency in your radiation treatment schedule is crucial for its effectiveness.
- Unprotected sun exposure: As mentioned under skin care, this is a lifelong precaution for the treated area.
- Public swimming pools or natural bodies of water: If your skin is broken or irritated, these can increase the risk of infection. Discuss swimming with your care team.

Always remember to communicate openly with your oncology team. They are your best resource for personalized advice based on your specific cancer, treatment plan, and individual side effects. They can help you navigate these challenges and provide strategies for managing discomfort.

Sources