

PALLIATIVE RADIATION THERAPY

Some cancer treatments are intended to help control the disease. Others, known as palliative treatments, are used to reduce pain and improve patients' quality of life. To "palliate" means to lessen the intensity of something. Many of the same techniques used to contain cancer also are used for palliation. By reducing the number of cancer cells, radiation treatments can ease pain, stop bleeding and relieve pressure, even when the cancer cannot be controlled.

When Should You Receive Palliative Radiation?

Your physician will consider your situation carefully when deciding whether to recommend palliative radiation treatment. Some factors include your overall condition, how much radiation treatments might help you, how difficult or inconvenient radiation therapy might be and what side effects are likely. Palliative radiation treatments can be especially helpful for cancer patients who have:

- A cancer that has spread (metastasized) to the bones or brain.
- A tumor that is pressing on the spinal cord and could affect the ability to walk or move.
- A tumor that is making it hard to eat, breathe or have bowel movements.
- Bleeding in the stomach, throat, bladder or other parts of the body.

Palliative Radiation Treatments

Before treatment begins, a physician who specializes in treating cancer with radiation, called a radiation oncologist, will meet with you. He or she will decide what area of your body to treat, how much radiation you should receive and how many treatments you will have. Then, a radiation therapist will mark the area to be treated on your skin using a marker or very small tattoos. A radiation therapist is a skilled medical professional with specialized education in delivering radiation treatments safely and effectively.

Many patients receive palliative radiation therapy 5 days a week for 1 to 3 weeks. However, some patients have fewer treatments or only 1 treatment. The procedures take a few minutes each and are not painful. The radiation therapist will stand outside the room and will be able to see you on a monitor during the treatment. You will be able to talk to each other through an intercom system.

Side Effects and Follow-up Care

How much and how quickly your symptoms improve after palliative radiation therapy depends on your particular medical condition. Talk to your physician if you have any questions about what to expect during or after the treatments.

Some patients become tired because of the radiation. Skin reddening in the area that was treated also is possible, but it usually does not occur at the radiation doses used for palliation. Other side effects depend on the body part being treated. For example, patients who have treatments to the abdomen might have nausea, diarrhea or both. Side effects can appear right away or they may take longer to develop. Ask your physician or radiation therapist about symptoms that bother you. In many cases, they can help relieve side effects.

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