

Radiation Therapy and Nutrition

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WHAT'S THE LINK BETWEEN RADIATION THERAPY AND NUTRITION?

Radiation therapy can cause side effects in some people. Some of these side effects can make it difficult for people to eat well. Eating enough food can help keep your weight up, and can make you feel stronger. If you feel strong, your body and immune system might be able to handle the treatments better.

Even though you may run into some of the problems listed below, it's important that you work with your dietitian to make sure you are eating as well as you can.

WHAT KINDS OF SIDE EFFECTS ARE THERE?

First, it's important to remember that not everyone will have side effects.

Every person's body is different, and every person's body will deal with radiation therapy in a different way. You may not have any problems with side effects.

Since radiation therapy is aimed at the cancer site, side effects usually depend on where the radiation is aimed.

For example, treatments for head and neck cancer can cause problems with eating and swallowing. Some people might have sore mouths or

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throats. These kinds of problems can make it difficult for people to eat all they need for good nutrition.

Treatments for cancer in the chest, lung, or breast can sometimes cause trouble swallowing, nausea, and vomiting.

Treatments for cancer in the pelvis or abdomen can cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea in some people.

APPETITE AND CALORIES

One common problem is loss of appetite. Feeling tired, sick, or just not hungry enough to eat can cause you to eat too little.

Not eating enough can be a serious problem for people having radiation treatments. During radiation therapy, your body is replacing tissues very quickly. New tissues need nutrients from food. With so many nutrients helping to develop new tissue, it is very important that you increase the amount of food you eat. This will help keep your weight up, and will help you stay strong during your therapy.

It's a good idea to boost the amount of calories you take in when you're having radiation therapy. Extra calories will help keep your weight up.

When you need to add calories, it's a good idea to add extra calories to foods you already eat. Some things you can add are:

- Butter and margarine

- Olive oil

- Mayonnaise

- Peanut butter

- Nuts

- Cheese

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Adding foods like these to your meals will help you take in more calories.

Here are some other tips to try:

- Drink milk, juice, or shakes instead of water from time to time.
- Try to add more dairy foods to your diet. Things like eggs, whipped cream, sour cream, and ice cream are good to try.
- Eat high-protein snacks that add calories to your diet. Things like peanut butter and crackers and puddings are good to try.
- Try some ready-made breakfast bars or instant breakfast shakes.

MOUTH PROBLEMS

Radiation therapy can lead to problems in your mouth that can make it hard for you to chew and swallow. Some of these problems are:

- Dry mouth
- Changes in the way food tastes
- Soreness and sores in your mouth
- Stiffness in your jaws
- Cavities

It's important to visit your dentist before and after your radiation therapy starts. Taking good care of your mouth will make eating right much easier for you.

Please ask your dietitian for handouts on dealing with mouth problems.

SWALLOWING PROBLEMS

Cancer itself and radiation treatments to the head and neck can cause swallowing problems for some people. Some people have choking or

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gagging problems when they swallow. Sometimes people will start coughing when they swallow.

Sometimes people swallow something wrong and it goes into their windpipe instead of their food pipe. This is called aspiration (asp-ih-ray-shun).

People who have trouble swallowing may not want to eat or drink all they need because of the problems they have swallowing. This can be a problem because people may not get the nutrition and extra calories they need.

Please ask your dietitian for handouts on swallowing problems.

NAUSEA AND VOMITING

Radiation therapy can cause nausea and vomiting in some people. Nausea and vomiting can be very difficult to deal with. It's hard to eat when you feel sick, but there are ideas you can try that should help.

- Ask your doctor about medicines called “antiemetics” (an-tee-uh-mett-iks). These are medicines that help control nausea and vomiting.
- It might help to eat several small meals during the day instead of eating normal large meals.
- Try to avoid food and things with strong smells, like some kinds of fish. Smoke can also bother some people.
- Avoid eating greasy or fried food.
- Avoid eating very spicy or sweet food.
- Try to take small sips of drinks or suck on some ice chips an hour or so after you've been sick. This should help your stomach settle.
- Try to eat some plain, dry food. Things like crackers or dry toast are good to try.

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- Try wearing loose, comfortable clothes. Try to make yourself as comfortable as possible.

Ask your dietitian for handouts on nausea and vomiting. These are side effects that can be controlled with medicine and sensible eating tips.

WORKING WITH YOUR DIETITIAN

Your dietitian will work with you to come up with a plan for eating right. You can develop meal plans that will help make sure you get the calories and protein you need to stay strong. If you have any questions, please ask your dietitian or doctor!

My Dietitian is: _____

Phone Number: _____

My next appointment is on: _____ at _____ AM/PM

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