



East Hawaii Health 1285 Waianuenue Cancer Center

1285 Waianuenue Avenue Hilo, Hawaii 96720 PH 808/932-3590 FAX 808/974-6864

Radiation to the Head and Neck

Patient Education

Your doctor suggests radiation to the head and neck area as part of your cancer treatment. This educational handout discusses possible side effects and ways to manage them.

Possible Side Effects

Sore mouth, throat, and difficulty swallowing.

You may have difficulty eating and swallowing. These symptoms may develop within two to three weeks after your first treatment. You may feel some discomfort but it should improve within two to three weeks after you complete treatment. You may be prescribed a special mouth rinse to provide relief. Your health care provider should look at your mouth weekly or as needed. Discuss any discomfort you have with your health care team.

Weight loss. Eating well may be hard while you have treatments. Your health care team will check your weight at least once a week and assess your fluid and food intake. You may need supplements such as Boost or Ensure. If you cannot eat enough food to maintain your weight, a feeding tube may be used on a short-term basis. Discuss your concerns with your health care team.

Irritants. Avoid hot liquids, fresh citrus juices, and spicy foods. These may irritate the treatment area and delay healing. Avoid tobacco and alcohol. These will dry and irritate your throat.

Dry mouth and dental problems. If your salivary glands are in the treatment area, you will produce less saliva. The saliva may become very thick. You can gargle or drink club



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soda to help get rid of the thick mucus. Symptoms of mouth dryness may begin during the first week of treatment and can continue for many months. Some mouth dryness may be long-term. To increase saliva, suck on sugar-free candy, popsicles, or gum.

A dry mouth can raise your risk of tooth decay and other dental problems. Visit your dentist before you start treatment. Careful oral hygiene is very important to help you keep a healthy mouth during and after treatment. These strategies can help you keep a healthy mouth:

- During treatment, gently clean and floss your teeth twice daily. Consult with your radiation oncologist about using a water pick. The pressure can cause damage to sensitive tissue.
- During treatment, rinse and gargle at least four times a day with a salt and soda mixture. Combine $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt in one quart of water. Do not use hydrogen peroxide or mouthwashes that contain alcohol as a gargle. These may irritate the lining of your mouth.
- Drink at least eight cups of liquid each day. Some patients find it helpful to carry a water bottle with them throughout the day.
- Try breathing through your nose rather than your mouth.
- Keep lips moist by using lip balm. If your lips are moist, your mouth may feel moister.
- If you wear dentures, swelling in your gums may change the fit. You may need to stop wearing your dentures until treatments are finished.



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Hair loss. After about two weeks, you may lose hair in the treated area. This may or may not be permanent and depends on the dose of radiation you receive. Hair usually begins growing back within three to six months after you complete radiation.

Taste changes. If your tongue is in the treatment area, you may notice changes in your sense of taste. This happens within the first two weeks of treatment. In most cases, your sense of taste will start to return slowly within months and improve for up to years after treatment.

Swollen glands. Some patients have swollen, tender salivary glands. This feels like having a case of the mumps and occurs in the first few days. It can cause mild pain but usually goes away by itself. You may take a mild anti inflammatory such as ibuprofen to relieve this symptom.

Fatigue. Feeling tired is common. Take good care of yourself while you are having treatments. Many patients report that mild exercise such as walking can improve energy levels. However, your level of activity should depend on what you feel like doing. If you feel very tired, you may need extra rest.

Skin changes. Side effects to the skin occur only in areas where the radiation enters and exits your body. If you are unsure where your treated areas are, ask your health care provider.

After a week or two of treatments, your skin will start to become dry. It may darken, turn pink to red, itch, or feel tender. You should take care of your skin from the first day of radiation before you notice these changes.

Here are some guidelines to help protect your skin:

- Wash skin gently with warm water. Do not scrub. Use your hand rather than a washcloth and pat dry with a soft towel.
- Use mild soap that is free of perfumes or deodorants.



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- Do not use adhesive products such as bandages or tape in the treated area.
- Avoid extreme heat or cold on the skin. Do not use heating pads, ice packs, or hot water bottles on the skin.
- Avoid exposing treated skin to the sun; it will be more sensitive. Use at least an SPF 30 when outdoors and wear a wide brimmed hat. Avoid tanning booths.
- Use only an electric razor if you shave within the treated area.

Suggestions to help manage skin reactions:

- Apply a moisturizing cream, lotion, gel, or oil to the radiated skin. Choose products for sensitive skin such as Aquaphor, Lubriderm or Keri lotion. Avoid products with perfume or deodorant.
- DO NOT APPLY 2 HOURS BEFORE RAD TREATMENT APPOINTMENT
- If your skin becomes tender or itchy, you can try a 1% hydrocortisone cream.
- If a product stings, stop using it.

Symptoms may continue after your last treatment. If you have any problems, please talk to your provider about your concerns.