

Radiation Therapy for Cancer

Radiation therapy uses strong beams or waves of energy to treat certain kinds of cancer and other problems caused by cancer. Not everyone who has cancer will get radiation therapy.



How does radiation work?

Radiation damages cancer cells so they can't grow and make more cancer cells.

Usually, a special machine is used to send high doses of radiation to the area of the cancer cells or tumors. This is called "external beam radiation therapy."

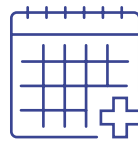
For certain types of cancer, a radioactive source is put inside the body near the tumor. This is called "internal radiation" or "brachytherapy." For other types of cancer, radioactive drugs are used. They can be given by mouth or put into a vein.

Radiation can be the only treatment given for a cancer. Or, it can be used with other treatments like surgery, chemotherapy, hormone therapy, targeted therapy, or immunotherapy.



Where do people go to get radiation therapy?

Radiation is usually given in an outpatient clinic or treatment center. Before starting treatment, you will meet your radiation therapy doctor and team. They will identify the exact area to be treated and what type and dose of radiation is needed to treat your cancer. For some radiation treatments, a person might need to stay in the hospital for one or more nights.



How often is treatment given, and how long does it last?

The plan for radiation treatment depends on the kind of cancer, whether it has spread to other parts of the body, and other health problems the person might have.

Each person's treatment and how long it lasts will be different. For example, a person getting external beam radiation therapy might get treated 5 times a week for a certain number of weeks. Their treatment usually only takes a few minutes each time it's given. But, a person getting brachytherapy might only get one treatment or might get a few treatments over a period of time.



Getting ready for radiation therapy

If radiation is part of your treatment, talk to your health care team about what to expect. This will help you plan for changes in your work or family schedule if needed.



Side effects of radiation therapy

Radiation therapy harms some normal healthy cells, which can cause side effects. Side effects people may get depend on the type and area of the body where the treatment is given. Because of this, not everyone getting radiation will have the same side effects.

Some side effects might happen during or right after getting treatment, while others might happen after a few days, weeks, months, or years after treatment.

Some common side effects include:

- Feeling weak and tired (fatigue)
- Skin changes on or around the treated area
- Hair loss at or around the treated area
- Low blood cell counts
- Other problems, depending on which part of the body is in the treatment area



Questions to ask

Here are some questions you can ask your doctor and health care team:

- What type of radiation will I get?
- How often will I get treatment?
- How long will my treatment last?
- Where will I go to get my treatment?
- Can I drive myself to treatment?
- Will I need other types of treatment?
- What side effects could I have?
- How will my side effects be managed and what can I do about them?
- Will I have any long-term or late side effects?
- Can I continue taking my other medications or supplements during treatment?
- Will my insurance pay for radiation therapy? How much will I have to pay?
- Will I be able to work, go to school, or take care of my family during treatment?
- What can I do to take care of myself during treatment?
- Are there any special things I need to do to protect myself and others while getting treatment?
- When should I call the doctor or nurse?

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and support, call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** or visit us online at **cancer.org/radiation**.
We're here when you need us.

