

Side Effects from Radiation Treatment to the Head and Neck

Canterbury Regional Cancer
and Haematology Service

Your doctor has recommended that you have a course of radiation therapy. This leaflet contains information about the treatment and its short and long term side effects. Each person reacts differently to treatment so the side effects can be different for each person. This leaflet discusses the most common. (If you are going to have chemotherapy, the side effects of this will be discussed with you separately).

There are two types of common side effects with radiation treatment to the head and neck. There are **short term** effects which happen during or shortly after the treatment and **long term** effects which **may** happen months to years later.

The **short term** side effects that may happen are:

- Lethargy/tiredness
- Nausea and vomiting
- Skin reaction
 - redness, dryness (similar to sunburn)
 - blistering
 - hair loss (in the treated area)
- Mouth/Throat
 - redness
 - dryness with a loss of taste
 - blistering of the lining
- Pain because of the reactions in your mouth and your skin

While on treatment you will be seen weekly by your doctor, who will help you to manage these side effects if they happen.

The **long term** side effects that may happen are:

- Skin Changes
 - Your skin in the treatment area may become lighter or darker than it used to be
 - thinning of the skin
 - increased sensitivity to the sun (Always wear sun protection)
- A permanent dry mouth
- Trismus (less jaw movement than before)
- Permanent hair loss in the treatment area
- Changes to your vision and hearing
- Dental caries
- Bone damage which may result in ulcers, pain or infection
- Underactive thyroid gland
- It is very rare but radiation therapy can cause a second cancer

If you have any concerns about the side effects of treatment, please discuss this with your doctor.

What happens now?

Radiation treatment is given daily (Monday - Friday) for approximately 4-7 weeks. Before your course of radiation treatment can start you will need to attend the Oncology Department for the planning of your treatment. This appointment will be sent to you in the mail.

More information about radiation treatment and its side effects can be found in your information folder or through The Cancer Society. You can contact them on 0800 226237, visit their website (www.cancernz.org.nz) or visit them on the ground floor of the Oncology Department.

This space has been left blank so that you can make notes or write down any questions that you may have: