

## Melanoma/Skin Cancer and Sarcoma Radiation Treatment Guide

Thank you for choosing MD Anderson Cancer Center at Cooper for your radiation treatment. The following information will help you understand your treatment process as we work together toward your recovery.

This material contains standard information and procedures. Because each patient receives individualized treatment, your health care team will give you specific information for you and your caregivers to follow, which may or may not be the same as in this document. Please follow the instructions you receive from your nurse or doctor.

### **Radiation Treatment**

Radiation treatment, sometimes called radiotherapy, effectively treats cancer by using high-energy rays to pinpoint and destroy cancerous cells in your body. Although radiation treatment is similar to having an X-ray taken of a broken bone, the dose of radiation in cancer treatment is higher and is given over a longer period of time. Many forms of radiation are available. The best choice for you depends on the type of cancer you have, the extent of the cancer and its location.

Generally, patients with melanoma will receive radiation five days per week for a total of eight treatments. Patients with sarcoma will receive radiation five days per week for a total of 25 to 30 treatments. The number of treatments you receive will be discussed at the time of your consult, simulation or weekly doctor's visit. You will receive a treatment schedule at the time of your first treatment. If you need to change your schedule, please discuss this with your radiation therapist.

### **Your Health Care Team**

Many different specialists will participate in your treatment planning, monitoring and administration. Your health care team may include doctors, nurses, therapists, dosimetrists, physicists and others.

The process may seem overwhelming to you. Please talk with your health care team about your concerns. They are here to help and support you and your caregiver during your treatment.

### **Simulation**

Before you receive your first radiation treatment, you will undergo a simulation, which is a treatment planning session. The simulation allows your radiation doctor to locate the exact area to be treated, to take measurements for treatment planning and to create shielding to protect healthy areas. This session usually takes about 45 minutes to one hour to complete.

## **During the Simulation**

You will be positioned on the table. Your radiation therapist will make a special immobilization device which allows you to remain very still during your radiation treatments. This device is used to ensure correct positioning during treatment. For example, patients who will have treatment to the head or neck area may have a mask, while other patients may have a cradle made for their body, leg or arm.

A computerized tomography (CT) scan and X-rays will be taken. These are used to create a three-dimensional picture of your treatment area. While these scans are being taken, the therapists will leave and monitor you from the adjacent room by closed-circuit television. If you need something during this procedure, speak normally. Your therapists will hear you over the intercom. If necessary, they can turn off the machine and come into the room immediately.

Marks will be made on your skin to ensure the radiation is aimed at the same area during each treatment. To help secure the marks, some may be covered with tape. The marking ink will stain, so you may want to wear old clothing or under clothes between the marks and your good clothing. The marks may be redrawn by the therapist if they fade or if your doctor wants to change them as your treatment progresses.

You will begin your radiation treatment approximately seven to ten working days after the simulation procedure. This will allow time for your health care team to design your treatment plan. On the first visit after the simulation, more X-rays will be taken to ensure the radiation is given to the correct area.

## **Treatment Schedule**

You will receive a treatment schedule after your first treatment. Radiation treatments are usually scheduled every weekday, Monday through Friday, allowing you to rest on Saturday and Sunday. You will receive all of your treatments in the outpatient clinic. We will notify you if the clinic plans to close for a scheduled holiday. Ask your radiation therapist if you have questions regarding your radiation treatment schedule or need to make a change. Due to the number of patients we serve, schedule requests are not guaranteed.

You can receive a new print out of your schedule by asking the patient access service specialist (PASS) or the receptionist at the front desk.

## **Weekly Management Visits or OTV (On Treatment Visit)**

You will see your doctor once a week while you are receiving treatment. Your weekly management visits may change during holidays and when your doctor is out. Your therapist/nurse will inform you of these changes.

MD Anderson may close all clinics and cancel appointments due to snow or other inclement weather. In addition, radiation treatment may close if the machines have operational difficulty. If this happens, your therapist will call you and give a call back number if you wish to check on the status.

## **Treatment Guidelines**

At each treatment, always check in at the reception desk in the radiation department as soon as you arrive.

The treatment itself is short, lasting only a few minutes, but it may take 15 to 30 minutes in the treatment room before you are finished. A staff person will help you on and off the treatment table.

Although the treatment machines are large and may make noise when in use, try to relax and breathe normally. You should not feel pain.

Once you are positioned, do not move until the therapist tells you the treatment has finished. You will be in the same position every day for your treatment. When you are positioned on the table, the therapist will leave the room, close the door and monitor you by closed-circuit television. If you need something during treatment, you can speak to your therapist over the intercom in the room. Speak normally and your therapist will hear you. If necessary, the therapist can turn off the machine and come into the room immediately. The radiation will stop when the machine is turned off.

### **Coping with Side Effects**

Some people may have side effects from radiation depending on the part of the body being treated and the stage of the tumor. Most side effects will go away within a few weeks after your treatment has stopped. Your doctor will review side effects with you during your consult visit. Tell your doctor or nurse if you experience any side effects.

### **Skin**

Skin in the treatment area may itch, become red and peel during the last several weeks of radiation treatment.

- Avoid scratching your skin. You may pat the skin. Ask your doctor or nurse about medicine to help relieve the itching. Use only the products that your doctor or nurse has approved.
- Avoid wearing tight fitting clothes around the treated area. Many patients find that loose fitting, cotton clothing is more comfortable. Cotton stays dry and feels soft on treated skin.
- Avoid injury, such as cuts or bruises, to the treatment site.

The skin in the treatment area will sunburn quickly after radiation treatments.

- Avoid sun exposure to the treatment area.
- Wear protective clothing or cover the treatment area if it will be exposed to sunlight for an extended amount of time.
- Do not use sunscreen while you are receiving radiation treatment.

### **Bathing**

During your treatment, avoid tub baths and hot showers. Steam will cause the lines to fade. In a warm shower, allow the water to run over the treated area.

Avoid using deodorant soaps. Instead, use a mild soap such as Dove<sup>®</sup> or Ivory<sup>®</sup> to clean, not scrub, the treated area. Gently pat skin dry or allow to air dry.

### **Stretching**

If your legs, arms or neck are being treated, you may feel tightness after a few weeks of treatment. You will need to do stretching exercises during your treatment to prevent tightness.

### **Fatigue**

It is not uncommon to feel more tired than usual. Do not overexert yourself and get plenty of rest. Try to exercise 20 minutes every day. This will help prevent severe radiation fatigue that may occur in the last week or two of treatment.

## **Nutrition**

It is very important to eat well and try not to lose weight during treatment. If you are losing weight, discuss with your doctor/nurse so they can arrange an intervention.

Eat high-protein foods such as meat, fish, eggs, cheese, milk and milk shakes. You can meet with a dietitian if you would like more information about your diet.

## **Sexual Activity**

You may engage in sexual activity if it is comfortable for you. It is extremely important to prevent pregnancy while you are receiving radiation treatment. Talk to your doctor before taking hormones, birth control pills, herbal products or using hormone creams.

If you are considering pregnancy after you complete treatment, please speak with your doctor. Your doctor can help you decide when this will be safe for you and your baby.

Radiation treatment to the pelvic area may affect your fertility (ability to have a child). If you want to have a biologic child after your cancer treatment, speak to your nurse or doctor about sperm banking or egg harvesting before beginning your radiation treatment.

## **Home Care Instructions**

After you have finished your treatments, it is important to follow these home care instructions.

### **Skin Care**

Your skin takes approximately two to three weeks to heal after your last radiation treatment. Give it time to heal.

Bathe or shower in lukewarm water. To clean the treated skin, use your hands, not a washcloth, and a mild soap that does not contain alcohol, deodorant or perfume. Do not soak in a bathtub for prolonged periods of time until the skin is healed. After bathing, pat the skin dry with a soft towel. Continue to apply the product your doctor has recommended until your skin has healed.

Continue to use a daily moisturizer on the treated skin. Examples include, but are not limited to, Aquaphor<sup>®</sup>, Miaderm<sup>®</sup>, Aloe (no perfume), Eucerin<sup>®</sup> cream, etc. Avoid creams or lotions that contain perfume because the alcohol content is higher.

Avoid wearing tight fitting clothing on the treatment area. Instead, wear loose fitting, cotton clothing to minimize irritating the skin until it is healed.

The treated area may be sensitive to injury. Do not expose the treated skin to extreme changes in temperature, such as a hot water bottle or ice pack.

Always protect the treated area from the sun. It will react quicker than non-treated skin to sunlight after radiation treatment. Regular clothing may not be enough protection from direct sun light. Applying sunscreen is your best defense from the sun. Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher for at least 12 months. Reapply it often when outside or exposed to the sun for longer than 10 minutes.

If after two to three weeks of your last treatment, you do not see improvement or your skin is not healing, tell your doctor. Also report any of the following symptoms to your nurse or doctor as these may be signs of an infection:

- Fever or chills.
- Foul odor.
- Severe bleeding.
- Yellowish or pus drainage.
- Severe pain.

For emergencies, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency center if you need immediate medical attention or treatment.

### **Diet and Exercise**

After your treatments are complete, eat a well-balanced diet that includes items from all food groups, including milk and milk products, lean meat and beans, vegetables, fruits and grains.

Drink eight, eight-ounce glasses (two quarts) of non-alcoholic fluids, each day to help speed the healing process.

Continue the stretching exercises to prevent stiffness to affected areas.

### **Follow Up With Your Radiation Doctor**

It is important to have regular follow-up exams with your radiation doctor and your primary cancer doctor. If your radiation doctor requests a follow-up visit, your appointment will be scheduled at the completion of your radiation treatment. If you have not received a date for a follow up appointment, please call your doctor's scheduler.

We want to make sure you take your medicines safely. For your follow-up appointment, please bring a list of all your prescription and non-prescription, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, nutritional supplements and herbal products.

In the future, if you need surgical procedures, dental work (extractions, surgeries, etc.) or biopsies that involve the treated area, tell your doctor about the radiation treatments you received. If necessary, your family doctor can contact your oncologist for more information.

### **Resources**

The American Cancer Society (ACS) is a voluntary national health organization with local offices around the country. The ACS supports research, provides information about cancer and offers many programs and services to patients and their families. Call 800.227.2345 or visit [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

The Cancer Information Service (CIS) is a program of the National Cancer Institute (NCI). People who call the CIS speak with highly trained and caring information specialists who can answer questions about cancer screening tests, risks, symptoms, how cancer is diagnosed, the latest treatments and support organizations. Call 800.422.6237 or visit [www.cancer.gov/contact/contact-center](http://www.cancer.gov/contact/contact-center).