Remember

It is important to be your own best health advocate. Follow all home care instructions you are given carefully. Be sure to tell a member of your health care team about any side effects that you notice. They can help you treat the problems and tell you how to lessen the chances that the side effects will come back.

Learning More

You can get more information about managing radiation therapy side effects at www.SAhealth.com or www.cancer.org. For information about local support groups and community resources, call the Methodist Healthcare HealthLine at (210) 575-0355 or toll-free at 1-800-333-7333.

Always talk to your doctor if you have specific questions and concerns about your health. Remember you should follow your doctor's advice and orders over anything else you may hear or read.

Nausea/Vomiting

Nausea/vomiting may occur if the abdomen is in the treatment field. Your doctor may prescribe an anti-nausea medication prior to each treatment. Eat smaller, more frequent meals and drink plenty of fluids.

Diarrhea

Diarrhea may be experienced if the abdomen or pelvis is being treated. An anti-diarrheal medication may be prescribed. Avoid roughage, raw fruits and vegetables, fried or highly seasoned foods. Drink six to eight glasses of fluids daily. Avoid alcohol and caffeinated drinks.

Difficulty Swallowing

To decrease the pain of swallowing, your doctor may recommend a topical anesthetic, pain medication, artificial saliva and/or drinking sufficient fluids to keep the throat moist. It is important to maintain good nutrition during this time. Be careful with thin liquids, such as water or juice, because they may be difficult to control while swallowing.

Painful Urination

This symptom may occur if you are receiving treatment to the pelvis. Be sure to drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol, caffeine, citrus and carbonated beverages. Notify your doctor if painful urination occurs.
Managing Radiation Therapy Side Effects

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Side effects from radiation therapy are different for each part of the body being treated. The most common side effects are fatigue and skin irritation. Most side effects will not develop until ten to fourteen days into treatment and are typically temporary, however, some can last for several weeks after treatment. Your doctor or nurse will discuss with you the side effects that are specific to your treatment. This brochure discusses many of the side effects patients may experience.

Fatigue

A feeling of fatigue is common during radiation therapy. Rest, relax and sleep when you feel tired or fatigued. Do not exhaust yourself with strenuous activity, however, we do recommend that you maintain some level of activity on a regular basis.

Skin Reactions

Skin changes sometimes occur during therapy. These may include redness, increased pigmentation (tanning) or peeling. These reactions are expected and usually occur about two to three weeks after your initial treatment. They are usually temporary and should heal in time. Avoid direct sunlight to the area being treated. Should it become necessary, a special skin ointment will be prescribed for you as a treatment for the reaction. Cornstarch may be applied as often as necessary to keep the area dry.

Do not apply ointments, salves, deodorants, colognes, cosmetics, heat or any self-remedies on the areas being treated during your radiation therapy. Check with your nurse or doctor about the use of over-the-counter skin products since many contain alcohol or fragrance that may irritate your skin. These instructions include the three-week period after your treatments are complete.

Hair Loss

Hair loss may occur within the area that is being treated. You should not lose hair on your head unless your head is receiving radiation therapy. Hair may be lost in its entirety or in patches. This is usually temporary but in rare cases may be permanent. Wear a hat or scarf on your head when you are in the sun.

Dry Mouth (Xerostomia)

Frequent mouth care, especially before meals, may provide some relief. Drink plenty of liquids to keep your mouth moist. Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless hard candy or ice chips which may make your mouth feel more comfortable. Eat soft, well-cooked foods that contain butter, sauces or gravies. Apply lip balm to your lips to prevent drying or cracking. If you smoke, reduce the frequency or stop smoking completely. Some people may benefit from a saliva substitute — discuss this with your doctor.

Mouth Sores

Avoid irritants such as alcohol, spicy or acidic foods, tobacco, very hot foods, and commercial mouthwashes. If you have dentures, remove and brush them thoroughly after meals. If your dentures are loose, ask your doctor when to have them adjusted, since your gums may remain inflamed during the treatment process.