



# Understanding Radiation Therapy

**Being prepared and knowing more about radiation therapy can help lessen some of the stress surrounding your treatment. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of radiation therapy.**

## What is radiation therapy?

Radiation therapy is a cancer treatment that uses x-rays to destroy or injure cancer cells so they cannot multiply. It can be used to treat primary or advanced cancer.

The aim of radiation therapy may be to:

- cure the cancer
- control the cancer (make it smaller or stop it from spreading)
- reduce symptoms and prolong good quality of life.

Sometimes radiation therapy is the only treatment used, or it can assist another treatment. This is called adjuvant therapy, and it can be given before your main treatment to shrink the cancer, or afterwards to stop the growth of any remaining cancer cells. In some cases, radiation therapy is used together with chemotherapy.

## How is radiation therapy given?

A radiation oncologist is a specialist doctor who will arrange and supervise your radiation treatment. A radiation therapist operates the radiotherapy machines under the direction of the radiation oncologist.

Radiation therapy is given from outside (external beam) or inside (brachytherapy) the body. In external beam radiation therapy, a machine directs radiation toward the cancer and surrounding tissues. In internal radiation therapy, radioactive material is put in thin tubes and placed inside your body near the cancer.

## How long is a course of treatment?

Your treatment will depend on what type of cancer you have, where it is, its size, your general health and other cancer treatments you may have had.

Different people need different numbers of radiation treatments. Some people need only one external treatment, while others will need it five days a week for several weeks.

Internal radiation therapy implants may be left in place for a few minutes, 1–6 days or permanently.

## Does radiation therapy hurt?

External beam radiation therapy won't hurt. You do not see or smell radiation, however you may hear a buzzing sound when the machine is on. You will NOT be radioactive. It is safe to be in contact with other people, including pregnant women and children.

An internal radiation therapy implant can cause a little discomfort, but you should not have any severe pain or feel ill during therapy. While the implant is in place, it may send some radiation outside your body. There will be limits on visitors while your implant is in place.

## What are the side-effects?

Side-effects vary depending on which area of your body is being treated. Many side-effects can be managed and will gradually disappear once your treatment has finished. Possible side-effects include:

- fatigue (tiredness)
- dry, red or itchy skin
- swelling
- loss of appetite
- nausea (feeling sick)
- digestive problems
- dry or sore throat or mouth
- cough or shortness of breath.

Having treatment near your reproductive organs can affect your ability to have children, temporarily or permanently. Talk to your doctor for more information.

## Where can I get reliable information?

- **Cancer Council NSW 13 11 20. Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia. [www.cancer council.com.au](http://www.cancer council.com.au)**
- **Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) 13 14 50**