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How Radiation Therapy Is Used to Treat Cancer

Radiation therapy is one of the most common treatments for cancer. More than half of people with cancer get radiation as part of their care. It might be called radiotherapy, irradiation, x-ray therapy, radiation treatment, or sometimes just radiation. It works by using high-energy rays, like x-rays, to destroy or damage cancer cells. Radiation therapy can be used on its own or with other treatments to treat cancer, shrink tumors before surgery, or destroy any cancer cells left after surgery. It might also be used to help with symptoms when cancer is advanced.

- [What is radiation therapy?](#)
- [How is radiation therapy different from other treatments?](#)
- [Who gets radiation therapy?](#)
- [What are the goals of radiation therapy?](#)
- [How is radiation therapy given?](#)
- [Who gives radiation therapy treatments?](#)
- [Does radiation therapy cause cancer?](#)
- [How does radiation therapy affect pregnancy?](#)
- [How does radiation therapy affect fertility for women?](#)
- [How does radiation therapy affect fertility for men?](#)
- [Questions to ask about radiation therapy](#)

What is radiation therapy?

Radiation therapy uses high-energy particles or waves, such as x-rays, gamma rays, electron beams, or protons, to destroy or damage cancer cells.

Your cells normally grow and divide to form new cells. But cancer cells grow and divide faster than most normal cells. **Radiation for cancer works by making small breaks in the DNA inside cells. These breaks keep cancer cells from growing and dividing and cause them to die.** Nearby normal cells can also be affected by radiation, but most recover and go back to working the way they should.

How is radiation therapy different from other treatments?

While [chemotherapy](#)¹ and other treatments that are taken by mouth or injection usually expose the whole body to cancer-fighting drugs, radiation therapy is usually a local treatment. This means it's usually aimed at and affects only the part of the body needing treatment. Radiation treatments are planned so that they damage cancer cells with as little harm as possible to nearby healthy cells.

Some radiation treatments (systemic radiation therapy) use radioactive substances that are given in a vein or by mouth. Even though this type of radiation does travel throughout the body, the radioactive substance mostly collects in the area of the tumor, so there's still little effect on the rest of the body.

Who gets radiation therapy?

More than half of people with cancer get radiation therapy. Sometimes, radiation therapy is the only cancer treatment needed and sometimes it's used with other types of treatment. The decision to use radiation therapy depends on the type and stage of cancer, and other health problems a patient might have.

What are the goals of radiation therapy?

Most types of radiation therapy don't reach all parts of the body, which means they're not helpful in treating cancer that has spread to many places within the body. Still, radiation therapy can be used to treat many types of cancer either alone or in combination with other treatments. While it's important to remember each cancer and each person is different, radiation is often the treatment of choice for the following purposes.

To cure or shrink early-stage cancer

Some cancers are very sensitive to radiation. Radiation may be used by itself in these cases to make the cancer shrink or completely go away. In some cases, chemotherapy or other anti-cancer drugs may be given first. For other cancers, radiation may be used

before surgery to shrink the tumor (this is called *pre-operative therapy* or *neoadjuvant therapy*), or after [surgery](#)² to help keep the cancer from coming back (_____)

give more radiation in the same place. It depends on the amount of radiation that was used before. In other instances, radiation might be used in the same area of the body or a different area. Some tumors do not respond as well to radiation, so radiation might not be used even if they recur.

How is radiation therapy given?

Radiation therapy can be given in 3 ways:

- [External radiation \(or external beam radiation\)](#)⁴: uses a machine that directs high-energy rays from outside the body into the tumor. It's done during outpatient visits to a hospital or treatment center. It's usually given over many weeks and sometimes will be given twice a day for several weeks. A person receiving external radiation is not radioactive and does not have to follow special safety precautions at home.
- [Internal radiation](#)⁵: Internal radiation is also called *brachytherapy*. A radioactive source is put inside the body into or near the tumor. With some types of brachytherapy, radiation might be placed and left in the body to work. Sometimes it is placed in the body for a period of time and then removed. This is decided based on the type of cancer. Special safety precautions are needed for this type of radiation for a period of time. But it's important to know if the internal radiation is left in the body, after a while it eventually is no longer radioactive.
- [Systemic radiation](#)⁶: Radioactive drugs given by mouth or put into a vein are used to treat certain types of cancer. These drugs then travel throughout the body. You might have to follow special precautions at home for a period of time after these drugs are given.

The type of radiation you might get depends on the kind of cancer you have and where it is. In some cases, more than one type is used. Your cancer care team can answer specific questions about the type of radiation prescribed for you, how it affects your body, and any precautions that may be needed.

Who gives radiation therapy treatments?

During your radiation therapy, a team of highly trained medical professionals will care for you. Your team may include these people:

- **Radiation oncologist**: This doctor is specially trained to treat cancer with radiation.

This person oversees your radiation treatment plan.

- **Radiation physicist:** This is the person who makes sure the radiation equipment is working as it should and that it gives you the exact dose prescribed by your radiation oncologist.
- **Dosimetrist:** This person helps the radiation oncologist plan the treatment.
- **Radiation therapist or radiation therapy technologist:** This person operates the radiation equipment and positions you for each treatment.
- **Radiation therapy nurse:** This nurse has special training in cancer treatment and can give you information about radiation treatment and managing side effects.

You may also need the services of a dietitian, physical therapist, social worker, dentist or dental oncologist, pharmacist, or other health care providers.

Does radiation therapy cause cancer?

It has long been known that radiation therapy can slightly raise the risk of getting another cancer. It's one of the possible side effects of treatment that doctors have to think about when they weigh the benefits and risks of each treatment. For the most part, the risk of a second cancer from these treatments is small and is outweighed by the benefit of treating the cancer, but the risk is not zero. This is one of the many reasons each case is different and each person must be part of deciding which kind of treatment is right for them. The risk is different depending on where the radiation treatment will be in the body.

If your cancer care team recommends radiation treatment, it's because they believe that the benefits you'll get from it will outweigh the possible side effects. Still, this is your decision to make. Knowing as much as you can about the possible benefits and risks can help you be sure that radiation therapy is best for you.

How does radiation therapy affect pregnancy?

It's important not to become pregnant while getting radiation. It can harm the growing baby. If there's a chance you might become pregnant, be sure to talk to your doctor about birth control options.

If you are or might be pregnant, let your doctor know right away.

How does radiation therapy affect fertility for women?

If the area getting radiation in your body includes the ovaries, it is possible that the dose of radiation can cause the ovaries to no longer work (sterility), and that you would be unable to have children. It is important to know the risk of this possibility in advance of receiving radiation therapy. If you are thinking about radiation therapy that will affect the ovaries, talk to your doctor about how this might affect having children in the future.

How does radiation therapy affect fertility for men?

Not much is known about radiation's effect on the children conceived by men while getting radiation therapy. Because of this, doctors often advise men to not get a woman pregnant during and for some weeks after treatment. Talk to your doctor to find out more about this.

If the area getting radiation includes the testicles, it is possible that the dose of radiation can cause the testicles to no longer work (sterility) and that you would be unable to have children. It is important to know the risk of this possibility in advance of receiving radiation therapy. There is no clear research about how sperm that is exposed to radiation affects future children made from that sperm. If you are thinking about radiation therapy that will affect the testicles, talk to your doctor about how this might affect having children in the future.

Learn more in [How Cancer and Cancer Treatment Can Affect Fertility](#)⁷.

Questions to ask about radiation therapy

Before treatment, you'll be asked to sign a consent form saying that your doctor has explained how radiation therapy may help, the possible risks, the type of radiation to be used, and your other treatment options. Before signing the consent form, be sure that you have had a chance to get all your questions answered. Here are some of the things you may want to find out more about:

Details of the treatment plan

- What's the purpose of radiation treatment for my type of cancer? To destroy or shrink the tumor? To prevent or stop cancer spread? To lower the chance the cancer may come back?
- What's the chance that the cancer will spread or come back if I do – or don't – get radiation therapy?
- What type of radiation therapy will I get?
- Are there other treatment options?

How to prepare for radiation therapy

- What can I do to be ready for treatment?
- Can I eat before treatment or do I need to avoid certain foods before getting treatment?
- Do I need to follow a certain diet while I'm on treatment?
- What will radiation treatment be like?

4. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/radiation/external-beam-radiation-therapy.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/radiation/internal-radiation-therapy-brachytherapy.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/radiation/systemic-radiation-therapy.html
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