

Diarrhoea caused by radiotherapy: dietary advice

Information for Patients

Radiotherapy and Diarrhoea

Pelvic radiotherapy can cause changes to the way your bowel works.

This leaflet contains information on dietary changes you can make if you are having loose, watery bowel motions (diarrhoea) caused by your radiotherapy.

If you are experiencing diarrhoea, let your radiographer, treatment nurse or cancer doctor know so they can also provide advice and prescribe medications to help you, if necessary.

Dietary Advice

It is important to continue to eat nourishing food during your radiotherapy but it may be helpful to make changes to your diet.

There is little research evidence on the best diet to follow for bowel problems. However, the following dietary advice used for people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) may be helpful:

- Have regular meals and nourishing snacks
 - Try not to miss meals or leave long gaps between eating. Take time to eat
- Fibre (or roughage) is an important part of a normal diet. Reducing the amount of fibre in your diet may help with your diarrhoea symptoms
 - Foods with high fibre content include: wholegrain cereals, wholemeal bread, nuts, dried fruits and the skin and stalks of fruits and vegetables. See **Appendix 1** (page 3) for suggestions on changes you could make to your diet
- Limit fresh fruit to three portions per day (one portion is 80g)
- If you have diarrhoea you should avoid sugar-free varieties of sweets, mints, chewing gum and drinks, containing sorbitol, mannitol and xylitol sweeteners
- Greasy, fatty or spicy foods may make diarrhoea worse.

Fluids

Drink plenty of fluids to replace the water you lose with diarrhoea (1.5 – 2 litres, or 8 – 10 cups a day). It may help to sip fluids slowly. Fluids can be water, squash or diluting juice, herbal tea or high-calorie drinks (such as Complan).

You should avoid alcohol and strong caffeinated drinks (such as tea and coffee) as these can make diarrhoea worse.

General Advice

- Keep a food and symptom diary whilst you are making the changes so you can see what has helped
- Your medical team may prescribe fybogel to help with your bowels. This absorbs water from your stools and can help normalise your bowel motions
- If your symptoms continue or worsen you may need to take loperamide (Immodium) to slow your bowels down. This can be prescribed by the medical team looking after you
- A very small number of patients need to be admitted to hospital for fluids through a drip if their symptoms are severe
 - If you're moving your bowels several times a day or if you feel dehydrated- you must let the radiographers, nurses or the medical team know
- It is important that you gradually return to your normal diet once your symptoms have improved.

Bowel problems after Radiotherapy

Most side-effects are temporary but it can take a few months for the effects to settle completely. **Blood in your stool is not normal and if you develop this you should see your GP.**

Pelvic radiotherapy can sometimes cause long-term changes to the way your bowel works. If you continue to have diarrhoea or bowel problems it is important to tell your medical team. You should not continue with dietary changes long-term unless you feel they help.

You may need to be referred to a bowel specialist (Gastroenterologist) if: you have pale or greasy looking stools; you are woken from your sleep or have to regularly get up overnight to empty your bowels. Please discuss this with your GP or cancer doctor (Oncologist).

Appendix 1: Low Fibre Diet Suggestions

We recommend that you keep your diet as normal as possible. However if you need to make some changes you may wish to try the following:

Food Group	Foods to Avoid	Foods to Choose
Bread	Wholemeal, brown, 50:50, granary, rye, seeded, fruit or nut breads	Breads/rolls made with white flour including pitta, naan, bagels and wraps
Cereals	Wholemeal or high fibre cereals Cereals with nuts/dried fruit added, including: muesli, granola, shredded wheat and porridge	Low fibre cereals such as Rice Krispies, Cornflakes, Frosties, Coco-pops
Pasta and Rice	Wholewheat or brown pasta. Noodles Brown or wild rice, bulgar wheat and quinoa	White rice and pasta White noodles or couscous Rice noodles or cakes
Cakes, Crackers and Biscuits	Wholemeal crackers and biscuits, flapjacks, cereal bars Cakes or pastries with fruit, seeds or nuts	Those made with white flour- no added nuts, seeds or dried fruit Plain scones, muffins, crumpets, pancakes and plain biscuits
Fruit	Limit fruit to three portions per day Fruit with skin, seeds, pips or piths such as oranges, figs, blueberries, raspberries, dried fruit	Fruit with all pips, pith and skin removed such as ripe banana, pear, melon, mango, tinned fruit
Vegetables	High fibre varieties such as cabbage, sprouts, broccoli Peas, beans, pulses such as lentils	Peel and remove stringy or tough bits Potatoes without the skin

Some of the content of this leaflet has been adapted or taken from the following sources, to which we are grateful:

- Guy's and St Thomas. *Radiotherapy for gynaecological cancer*. Leaflet number: 1762/VER8
- Cancer Research UK. *Tips on coping with diarrhoea*
- NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, The Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre. *High Fibre and Low Fibre Food Sheet*. Originally adapted as SABO leaflet by L. Webster
- British Columbia Cancer. *How to Treat Diarrhoea Caused by Your Treatments and Medications*
- The Christie NHS Foundation Trust. *Radiotherapy for gynaecological cancers: A guide for patients and their carers*. CHR/XRT/103/12.03.03 Version 5
- Cleveland Clinic. *Radiation Therapy Side Effects: Diarrhea: Procedure Details*
- Macmillan Cancer Support. *Bladder and Bowel Problems*.