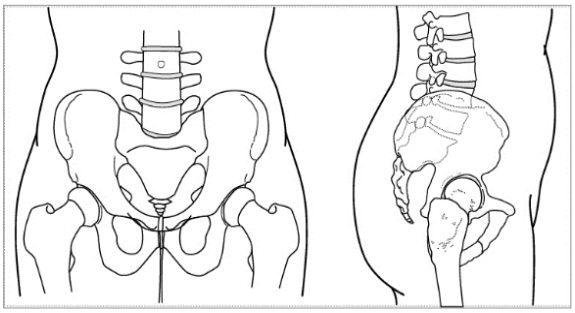
Radiation Therapy to the Pelvis

You will have radiation to the pelvis (the area between your hips) for 4-6 weeks. Read this handout to learn more.



Position for Your Treatment

Right before each treatment, you will lie on a treatment table. Staff will help you get into the right position.

- You may use a mold to help you stay in the right position. The mold is made during treatment planning
- You may have small dots or marks on your skin. These marks show the treatment area
- The marks may look like small freckles and can be hard to see
- If the marks fade, staff will mark them again
- After treatment is done, you can let the marks fade or gently remove them with soap and water or baby oil
- The marks may rub off on your clothes. If this happens, spray the stain with hair spray or Spray 'N Wash® before washing your clothes

Skin Care During Treatment

Follow these steps during treatment and until your skin has healed:

- Take baths or showers with warm water
- If you use soap, choose one made for dry or sensitive skin, such as Aveeno®, Dove®, Basis®, Neutrogena®, Cetaphil® or Ivory®
- Rinse your skin well and gently pat it dry
- **Do not** rub or scrub the treated skin
- **Do not** use heating pads, very hot water or hot water bottles
- **Do not** put ice or very cold water on the treated skin
- Keep the treated skin out of the sun and away from sunlamps
- Cover the treated skin when you are outside. If clothes do not cover the whole area, use sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher
- Wear loose cotton clothes that let air reach your skin
- **Avoid** nylon and other man-made fabrics that hold moisture next to your skin
- **Avoid** tight clothes that may irritate your skin
- **Do not** put tape on the treated skin
- **Do not** use bath oils, perfumes, powders, lotions or other products on the treated skin unless your doctor or nurse says they are safe
- Use a skin moisturizer each day if your care team tells you to

Side Effects

Radiation to the pelvis can cause side effects. These may include skin reactions, diarrhea, rectal irritation, bladder irritation and fatigue. Not everyone has side effects.

Side effects may start about 2-3 weeks after treatment begins. They may last for 2-4 weeks after treatment ends.

Side effects may occur at different times. They may also depend on the part of your rectum being treated:

Tumors higher in the rectum may cause more diarrhea and less skin irritation
Tumors lower in the rectum may cause more skin irritation

Skin Reactions
The skin in the treatment area may become:

- Red or sore
- Dry or itchy
- Wet or peeling

Skin reactions happen most often in skin folds and curves. Your care team will tell you which areas to watch.

- Check your skin often
- Tell your care team about any changes
- Use skin care products as told
- Tell your care team if you have pain or need help with skin care

Tylenol® or ibuprofen may help with pain. Tell your care team if you need more help with pain.

Diarrhea
Radiation can cause diarrhea because the lining of the bowel is very sensitive to radiation.

How severe the diarrhea is may depend on:

- How much of the bowel is in the treatment area
- The total amount of radiation you receive

Diarrhea most often starts during the 3rd or 4th week of treatment.

If you do not have diarrhea:

- Keep eating your normal diet
- Eat foods high in protein, such as meat, fish, milk, cheese, eggs and peanut butter

If you have diarrhea:

- Tell your care team
- Eat less fiber and fat
- Drink 8-12 glasses of liquids each day
- Take medicine if your care team tells you to

See *Health Facts for You* #323, Eating Hints to Help with Diarrhea.

Rectal Irritation
Radiation to the pelvis may cause a sore rectum. This is a short-term side effect. The lining of the rectum is very sensitive to radiation.

Diarrhea may make the soreness worse. If you have hemorrhoids, they may also get worse during treatment.

Symptoms may include:

- Burning
- Itching
- Small amounts of bleeding

Symptoms may happen inside or outside the rectum. They may be mild or may need treatment.

Hemorrhoid medicine with hydrocortisone, such as Preparation H®, Anusol HC® or a generic brand, may help. Talk with your doctor or nurse about your symptoms.

Bladder Irritation
Radiation may cause swelling or soreness of the bladder lining. This is a short-term side effect.

Symptoms may include:

- Needing to urinate all of a sudden
- Needing to urinate more often
- Burning or pain when you urinate

If you have bladder symptoms:

- Tell your doctor or nurse
- Drink plenty of liquids
- Give a urine sample if asked
- Take medicine if your doctor orders it

Bladder symptoms may also be signs of an infection.

Feeling Tired

Feeling tired (fatigue) during radiation treatment is common. Fatigue does not mean your tumor is getting worse.

Some people do not have fatigue and can keep their normal routine. Others may need more rest or may need to change their routine.

Fatigue may start right away or after 1-2 weeks of treatment. It may last for a few weeks or months after treatment ends. It rarely lasts for 1 year.

Low blood cell counts may also make you tired. Your bone marrow makes blood cells. If radiation is given to a large area of bone, your body may make fewer blood cells. This is a short-term side effect.

Your doctor may order blood tests to check your blood cell counts.

Tips for Fatigue

- Listen to your body and rest when you need to
- Take a short nap or sleep a little longer if it helps
- Make time for things you enjoy when you have the most energy
- Take a walk, visit a friend or enjoy a hobby
- **Do not** smoke
- Limit alcohol
- Talk with your doctor or nurse if you need help
- Keep working if you feel able. You may need to work fewer hours
- Take walks, ride an exercise bike or do other mild exercise
- Go at your own pace. Do not exercise until you are tired
- Talk with family or friends about your feelings
- Keep foods on hand that take little work to make, such as cheese, yogurt or slices of meat
- Cook and freeze meals when you have more energy
- Eat more calories and protein during treatment
- Talk with a clinic nurse if you have trouble eating
- Drink 8-12 glasses of fluid each day
- Ask your nurse or social worker for help with daily needs
- Let family and friends help with tasks, meals or child care
- Keep visits short if they make you tired
- Tell your doctor or nurse about any pain you have

Your nurse or social worker may be able to help with:

- Meals
- Cleaning
- Personal care
- Rides
- Support groups
- Respite care

Fertility

Radiation to the pelvis can affect your fertility.

Radiation in the pelvic area may stop menstruation. It may also cause symptoms of menopause. Treatment can also result in vaginal itching, burning, and dryness. If you have these symptoms, contact your nurse or doctor.

Radiation to the pelvis can also reduce the number of sperm and their ability to fertilize. This does not mean that you cannot conceive a child.

Talk to your doctor about birth control. You should not become pregnant or conceive a child during treatments. If you are pregnant before starting treatments or suspect you may be, please tell your nurse or doctor right away.

Sex
Sometimes, when you have cancer and are going through treatment your sex drive will decrease. This side effect will likely go away when the treatment ends. It helps to tell your partner your needs and feelings.

You may have sex unless your doctor tells you not to. Sex may become painful due to the shrinking and the drying of vaginal tissues. Using vaginal lubricants and changing position during sex may help. Your doctor may suggest using a vaginal dilator during and after treatment to prevent vaginal tightness. Your nurse will tell you how to use it.

Radiation to the pelvis causes ovaries to stop working. If you have not gone through menopause, you will do so at this time. You may or may not have symptoms of menopause. Symptoms of menopause may include hot flashes, mood changes, vaginal dryness, tingling, and insomnia. Your doctor will talk with you about ways to manage these symptoms. This may or may not include hormone replacement therapy.

Treatment may affect your ability to get or maintain an erection. Most of the time, this is a short-term side effect. Rarely, it can be a permanent side effect.

Radiation can cause pubic hair to thin. It begins about 2-3 weeks after treatment has started. Your pubic hair may or may not come back. How long this side effect lasts depends on the total dose of radiation given.

Food Supplements
Food supplements can add protein and calories to your diet. You can find them at grocery, drug and health food stores.
Some brands include:

- Carnation Instant Breakfast®
- Boost®
- Ensure®
- Sustacal®
- Osmolyte®
- Skandi-Shake®

If you have diabetes, choose Glucerna® or Choice® products.

Many stores also have generic brands. Canned liquid supplements are ready to drink. You can mix powdered supplements into drinks or food.

Other Concerns
Cancer can affect many areas of your life. It can affect your emotions, marriage, family, jobs, finances. You may also feel concerned about your future. The nurses and social workers can help you cope.

Cancer Resource Services
Gilda's Club offers support and education. It is free support for everyone living with cancer. Call **608-828-8880** or email **program@gildasclubmadison.org**

Cancer Information Service has information about cancer care around the country as well as locally. The toll-free number is **1-800-422-6237**.

Who to Call

Please call if you have any questions or concerns. The phone number for the Radiation Oncology Clinic is **(608) 915-1200**. If you live outside of the Madison area, call **1-800-323-8942**. If the clinic is closed, your call will be transferred to our answering service. Ask to speak to the radiation oncology doctor on call. The doctor will call you back.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 10/2026. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#4617.