This sheet aims to provide information on **potential side effects** for patients receiving radiation therapy treatment for gynaecological cancers at Auckland Radiation Oncology (ARO).

X-rays used in radiation therapy can damage the DNA (genetic code) of cells. The radiation also affects the normal tissues of the body, and this can cause side effects. However, we know that normal tissues are better able than cancer cells to heal the radiation damage, and most of the normal tissues will recover.

Due to improvements in treatment planning systems and treatment delivery, the side effects of radiation therapy have been reduced remarkably. However, some side effects still occur and can be categorised as **Acute** (short term) or **Chronic** (long term) side effects.

**ACUTE SIDE EFFECTS** (Short Term)

These are side effects that occur *during* the treatment course and usually take a few weeks to resolve after completion of treatment. At the beginning of the course you may notice little change, except perhaps, some fatigue. At about half way through and then increasing toward the end, the acute side effects may appear. Your treatment and patient care teams will help you manage any side effects, please inform them if symptoms start appearing.

The peak of any reactions/side effects you experience will occur approximately 7-14 days after the completion of your radiation treatment. This is due to the cumulative nature of the treatment.

**COMMON ACUTE REACTIONS**

**Fatigue**

General tiredness may occur during and after the treatment course. Some people may still be able to work and only take time off for the daily appointment, but others may find it too tiring and prefer to stay at home. You may also be more emotional than usual and wish to call on family and friends to help during this time.

**Advice to help combat fatigue includes:**

- Keep up your fluid intake while on treatment (1.5-2 litres a day).
- Maintain a well-balanced diet
- Mild exercise e.g. walking for 30 minutes three times per week has shown to be beneficial in dealing with the fatigue associated with radiation therapy. Generally you can carry on your usual level of activity. However, it is important you listen to your body and do not over exert yourself if fatigue is an issue.
- Get plenty of rest each day. This facilitates the normal body tissues to recover on a daily basis from the effects of the radiation therapy.
Bladder Irritation
Due to the position of most gynaecological cancers a portion of the bladder may become inflamed. This means you may experience:
• More urgent and frequent urination (including at night)
• A feeling you need to go but find you are not passing much urine.
• A sensation of burning discomfort during or at the end of the stream. It is recommended you stop ingesting any fluids approx 2 hours before you go to bed for the night. This is to help prevent disturbed sleep by minimising the number of times you need to use the bathroom at night. For frequent urination and burning sensations speak to your team about ural (alkalizing agent) and whether it is right for you.

Bowel Irritation
Also due to the position of most gynaecological cancers a portion of the bowel may become inflamed.

This means you may experience:
• More urgent, looser and frequent bowel motions
• Increased amount of flatulence (wind) and mucus
• The anus may become sore when motions are passed, and there may be some bleeding, particularly if you have haemorrhoids.

It is recommended you:
• Are initially on a high fibre diet. If your bowel motions change and become looser, firstly begin to reduce the fibre in your diet by swapping some foods in high fibre column to those in low fibre column of your dietary guidelines. If they continue to be loose, speak to your treatment team.
• Use alcohol free wipes instead of toilet paper. This may help with sore skin around the anus. Remember, not all wipes are flushable.
• Have salt water baths to help with sore skin. Please ask the RTs for a saline solution you can make at home.

Skin Reddening and Irritation
The skin in folds such as the buttock fold, in the groin, the area around the anus and the skin of the vulva and urethra may become red, sore and inflamed. This does not usually happen until a couple of weeks into treatment.

To help minimise/sooth a skin reaction:
• Use very mild soap such as Dove Extra Sensitive or Simple Soap
• Pat your skin dry, do not rub at all
• Use salt water rinsing or bathing to help soothe and clean skin once or twice a day (further information will be provided at the planning appointment.)
• Use non alcoholic and non scented baby wipes instead of toilet paper
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- Wear loose cotton underwear and if you can, lie with no underwear in a private place to let air circulate around the pelvic area.

If your skin does become sore, let a member of the treatment team know as there are different creams/gels that may be recommended to soothe this.

**Vaginal Reactions**
During radiation, tissues in the vagina become pink and inflamed, somewhat like sunburn. A woman's vagina may feel tender, dry or bleed easily during the course of radiation treatment and these side effects may continue for a few months after the completion of treatment.

If you are sexually active and want to continue during your treatment, generous amounts of lubrication and gentle sexual activity should be used to help prevent pain or irritation. If you are able to get pregnant, remember to be conscientious with protection during this time as pregnancy is not recommended.

The fragile skin has a slightly increased risk of infection, so please let the treatment team know of any unusual discharge or odour. To aid healing, wash the external vaginal area generously in a warm salt bath (1 cup of salt to a bath, at least once a day). As the irritation heals, scarring occurs and the thick walls of the vagina become “fibrous” and “sticky” and may join together. These are called adhesions and should be minimised and separated by using a dilator during the tissue healing stage. By minimising adhesions future examinations are less painful and less complex. Information and a dilator will be provided for you near the end of your treatment.

**Nausea**
Nausea is a common side effect especially if chemotherapy is combined with radiation. Please inform the radiation therapist, nurse or doctor and they can arrange appropriate medication for you.

Try to have small and frequent meals and ensure your fluid intake is adequate (1.5-2 litres of water per day). Remember you need to maintain your energy levels during treatment.

**Hair Loss**
Radiation treatments cause hair loss in the treatment area only. You may therefore experience some loss of pubic hair. In most cases this hair should grow back after completion of your course of treatments.

**CHRONIC REACTIONS**
A few patients experience some long-term side effects. Chronic side effects may arise many months or even years after the completion of radiation therapy. These side effects relate to the ‘scarring’ effects of the radiation therapy on normal tissues within the area of treatment.

**Disturbances to Bowel Habits**
This is the most common chronic side effect and can vary in severity. Permanent changes can include the following:

- A feeling of wanting to pass a motion or straining (whether or not you actually need to)
- Slight bleeding when passing a bowel motion
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- Bowel movements may continue to be looser or more frequent than they were before your treatment. For most individuals, the condition is mild and no active treatment is required.

**Bladder Changes**
- Less than one percent of women develop serious urinary irritation resulting in frequent urination and urgency.
- Radiation treatment can also cause a narrowing of the tube (urethra) from the bladder to the penis, which can make it difficult for you to pass urine. This ‘striction’ can be treated with surgery if necessary.
- Due to changes in the bladder, blood can be passed when urinating. This may require investigation and active treatment.
- Incontinence. We have a physiotherapist on site who can help with changes to continence.

**WEBSITES AND ORGANISATIONS OF INTEREST**

Dove House: [https://www.dovehospice.org.nz](https://www.dovehospice.org.nz). Located in Glendowie, Auckland. Offers a range of non medical therapies to support you through the challenges of living with a life threatening illness. All services are free of charge.