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What to expect from radiation therapy

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Radiation therapy is a common form of cancer treatment used to kill cancer cells and prevent the disease from spreading to other parts of the body. More than 60 percent of people with cancer receive this form of treatment to slow the growth of cancer or decrease the size of tumors. In cases when a cure is not possible, radiation therapy may be used to reduce pressure, alleviate pain or prevent problems such as blindness or urinary incontinence.

Radiation therapy is administered in one of two ways. External radiation therapy uses special equipment to aim high-energy beams of radiation from

outside the body to the affected area. Internal radiation, also called brachytherapy, works by placing small amounts of radioactive material in or near the tumor inside the body. Radiation works by destroying or slowing the growth of cancer cells. Some normal cells may be affected by radiation, but they usually recover following treatment.

Radiation therapy may be spread out over an extended period of time to allow healthy cells to recover while cancer cells die. It can be administered once a day for several weeks or in smaller doses twice a day. Dosage amount is balanced between being high enough to treat the cancer but low enough not to damage any more normal cells than necessary. Cancer cells will continue to die long

after treatment is completed.

Radiation therapy may be used in conjunction with other forms of cancer treatment. Radiation may be administered before surgery to shrink the size of a tumor or after surgery to kill any remaining cancer cells. Radiation also may be used with chemotherapy, a form of treatment that exposes the entire body to cancer-fighting drugs.

Radiation therapy does not cause pain, but side effects associated with treatment can cause discomfort depending on the area being treated. In addition to fatigue, cancer patients also may experience skin irritation near the radiated site, diarrhea, dry mouth, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite or infertility. Side effects may become noticeable



shortly after treatment starts and continue for several weeks after treatment stops.

A team of professionals is involved in providing radiation therapy, including:

- Radiation oncologist – a physician who determines the plan of treatment, including the amount of radiation received,

when it will be administered and how it will be delivered

- Radiation physicist – who ensures the equipment is working properly and the correct dose is given

- Radiation nurse – who cares for the patient during treatment

- Radiation therapist – who positions the patient for treatment and operates the radiation equipment on a daily basis

Ongoing follow-up care will be necessary after treatment ends. Patients are encouraged to look for signs of late side-effects and be vigilant in checking for any signs of cancer recurrence. Patients should notify their doctor if they notice an unexplained weight loss, change in appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea,

constipation, consistent pain or new lumps, skin irritations, bruises, swellings or bleeding.

For more information about radiation therapy, talk with your doctor or visit the National Cancer Institute Web site at www.cancer.gov.

North Shore Medical Center's Community Cancer Center is accredited by the American College of Surgeons and treats all types of adult cancers, including Breast Cancer. We specialize in external beam radiation therapy using some of the latest IMRT (Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy) technique and HDR (High Dose Rate) brachytherapy for Breast Cancer. For more information talk with your doctor or visit www.northshoremedical.com or call 1-800-984-3434 for a free physician referral.