

What is cancer?

Being told you have or might have cancer is a shock for most people. Almost everyone knows someone who has had cancer.

Cancer facts

- All cancers are not the same
- Cancer can be caused by smoking, other poisons, asbestos or the ultraviolet rays in sunlight although the exact cause of most cancers is unknown
- Cancer can happen to anyone not just people who are unhealthy
- Most cancers don't 'run' in families. However, there are genes that are passed on from parents that make it easier for cancer cells to grow
- Cancer doesn't always cause death – many people survive cancer, especially if diagnosed early
- Cancer is not a punishment for something you did wrong

Cancer growth

Cancer can affect different organs and any part of the body.

Our bodies are made up of tiny cells that we can't see with our eyes. You need microscopes to see them. Cells make up our skin, our organs (i.e. liver, stomach, bowel and all other organs), our blood and our bones.

Normal cells grow in a cycle; they grow, divide, die and do that over and over again. Cancer cells are different; they grow and divide and keep growing and dividing and get out of control.

This is called abnormal cell growth. These abnormal cells that grow very fast and out of control are called cancer.

Not all tumours are cancer

There are two kinds of tumours: benign and malignant.

Benign (be-nine) tumours do not spread to other parts of the body; they are not cancer.

Malignant (mal-ig-nant) tumours are cancer. They can spread to other parts of the body.

Tiny cancer cells may break away from the original cancer and spread:

- through the blood or lymphatic system (glands) to nearby organs
 - to form new tumours in other areas of the body.
- This is called metastasis (meh-tas-tuh-sis) or secondary cancer

Who to speak to

If you have been told you have a cancer, a team of specialists will help treat you. You need to visit the Oncology Department at the hospital.

Other words doctors might use to describe cancer:

- a growth
- disease
- neoplasm
- tumour
- mass or lump
- metastasis

For more information

- Call Cancer Council 13 11 20
- Visit www.cancercouncil.com.au
- Visit www.menzies.edu.au/cancer

Understanding cancer talk

Doctors may use words you don't understand. It's okay to ask them to explain something again.

Understanding cancer

advanced disease

Disease that has spread outside the organ or tissue to other places in your body

benign

Not cancer. Does not invade or spread to other parts of the body although it may grow bigger and still cause some troubles

biopsy

The removal of a small bit of the lump or tumour, which is examined under a microscope to help diagnose disease

cancer

The name for more than 200 diseases where abnormal cells multiply and grow without control

cancer-in-situ

Early stage cancer. This usually means that the total cancer can be removed with surgery or biopsy

curable

Cancer that can be made to disappear for good

diagnosis

Working out what kind of cancer someone has

incurable

A cancer that doesn't go away for good but can be controlled for a period of time

localised cancer

Cancer that is confined to a small area or areas

lymphatic or glandular system

Glands are part of the body's defence system that protects your body from sickness and disease

lymph glands or nodes

Part of the lymphatic system. They are small bean shaped glands found in the body in places like the neck, groin, armpit, chest and abdomen.

malignant

Cancerous. Can spread to other parts of the body.

UNDERSTANDING CANCER TALK

Understanding cancer

metastasis	When cells from the cancer spread from one part of the body to another. Also called secondary cancer
oncology	The study, diagnosis and treatment of cancer
primary site	Where the cancer first starts in the body
prognosis	What is likely to happen when someone has a disease, especially their chance of getting better and what might happen after treatment
staging	Tells how far the disease has spread in the body. This can be done by scans, x-rays or during surgery
tumour (too-mer)	A lump in the body caused by uncontrolled growth of cells. Can be benign or malignant. Also called a neoplasm or mass
tumour marker	A substance in your blood or blood tissue that helps doctors to see if cancer is present. For example, PSA is a marker for prostate cancer

Types of cancers

carcinoma (car-sin-oma)	A tumour that starts in the cells of the skin and the body's organs
leukaemia (le-k-em-i-a)	A cancer that forms in the bloodstream (blood cancer)
lymphoma (lim-ph--oma)	A cancer that forms in the lymphatic or the glandular system (glands) of the body
sarcoma (sar-co-ma)	A tumour that starts in parts of the body like bone, cartilage and muscle that hold the body together

Doctors might use these words to describe different types of cancers.

UNDERSTANDING CANCER TALK

Treatment words

adjuvant therapy	After surgery removes or reduces cancer, treatments such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy are offered
alopecia	Medical term for hair loss. This is sometimes a side effect of chemotherapy.
anaemia	When blood does not carry enough red cells and oxygen to the rest of the body. It can cause tiredness and fatigue
anti-emetic	A medicine that reduces feelings of sickness (nausea) and vomiting (spuing)
biological therapy	Uses your body's natural defence mechanisms to help fight the disease
blood test	Taking some blood, often from a vein in the arm, by using a thin needle
bone marrow	The soft, spongy material inside bones. The bone marrow contains stem cells that produce the three types of blood cells: red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets
bone marrow and stem cell transplantation	A medical procedure used to replace bone marrow destroyed by high doses of chemotherapy with healthy bone marrow. Used to treat diseases of the blood, bone marrow and certain cancers.
chemotherapy (also called chemo)	Uses medicines to treat cancer. Chemo can be given through a needle (intravenously) or by swallowing tablets or liquid (orally)
clearance margins	When tumours are removed, surgeons also remove an area of good tissue around the cancer. This is to ensure they have removed it all. This is called a clearance margin
complementary treatments	Treatments that can be used with regular cancer treatments. For example, massage, music therapy, meditation, bush medicine
cycles	Chemo is normally given at regular intervals. Each one of these is called a cycle. It is followed by a period during which the body recovers

You will hear doctors use these words during treatment.

UNDERSTANDING CANCER TALK

Treatment related words

genetics	The study of heredity and the way a parent passes certain genes on to their children
intravenous or IV	An intravenous drip gives fluids directly into a vein. Generally the drip is put in your arm or hand
lymphoedema	Chronic swelling (oedema) of part of the body that can occur after cancer treatment. It usually develops slowly and can appear months after treatment for cancer
mucositis	An inflammation of the lining of the mouth, throat or gut. It is common after cancer treatment
nausea	A feeling like you are going to vomit (spu). It makes you feel weak
neutropenia	A decreased number of white cells in your blood. This increases the risk of infection, which sometimes happens after chemotherapy
outpatient	People visit a hospital for treatment but don't stay overnight
palliative care	A team to support someone with advanced or terminal cancer and their families. It focuses on relieving symptoms. You can have it at home; it respects all beliefs
platelets	Cells in the blood that help your blood to clot. If you cut yourself, clotting helps the bleeding to stop
prosthesis	An artificial substitute for a missing body part such as an arm, leg or breast
radiotherapy (radio/radiation therapy)	A common way to treat cancer. Uses high energy rays to shrink or stop the cancer from getting bigger
red cells	Cells in the blood that carry oxygen around the body
surgery	An operation to remove or reduce cancer
transplantation	When you receive a body part, tissue or cells from another person or your own body
white cells	Cells in the blood that fight infections

UNDERSTANDING CANCER TALK

Many different people may care for you when you are having treatment for cancer. Who you see will depend on the type of cancer you have.

People who work with cancer

cancer care coordinator	One person who assists in coordinating your care during your treatment
dietitian	A specialist who helps with your nutrition. Sometimes they may offer special foods or drinks
endocrinologist	A doctor who specialises in hormones for the body, such as diabetes or thyroid disease and others
gynaecologist	A doctor for women’s reproductive business
haematologist	A doctor who specialises in the treatment of diseases in the blood and bone marrow
medical oncologist	A doctor who uses medicines such as chemotherapy and hormone therapy to treat cancer
multidisciplinary team (MDT)	A group of specialists who work together to treat your cancer
neurologist	A doctor for the brain and nervous system
oncologist	A doctor who specialises in treating cancer
pathologist	A doctor who specialises in examining cancers under the microscope
pharmacist	A specialist who provides advice on medications prescribed by your doctor
radiation oncologist	A specilist doctor who prescribes radiotherapy and organises the treatment
surgeon	A doctor who removes cancer from the body

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Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy, also called chemo, uses medicines to treat cancer.

What is chemotherapy?

- Chemotherapy works in your whole body, by travelling through your blood to kill the cancer.
- There are many different chemo medicines to treat the many different cancers.

Why do I need it?

Because your body cannot fix cancer by itself, doctors use chemo medicines to poison the cancer.

These medicines may help to:

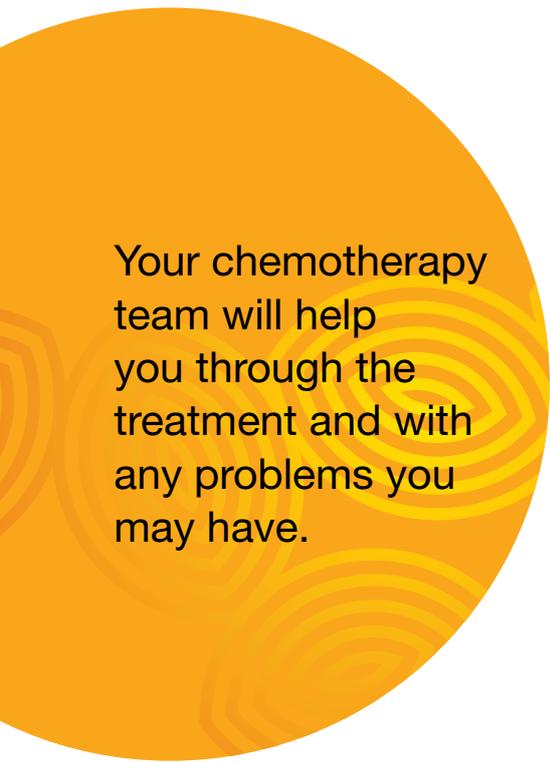
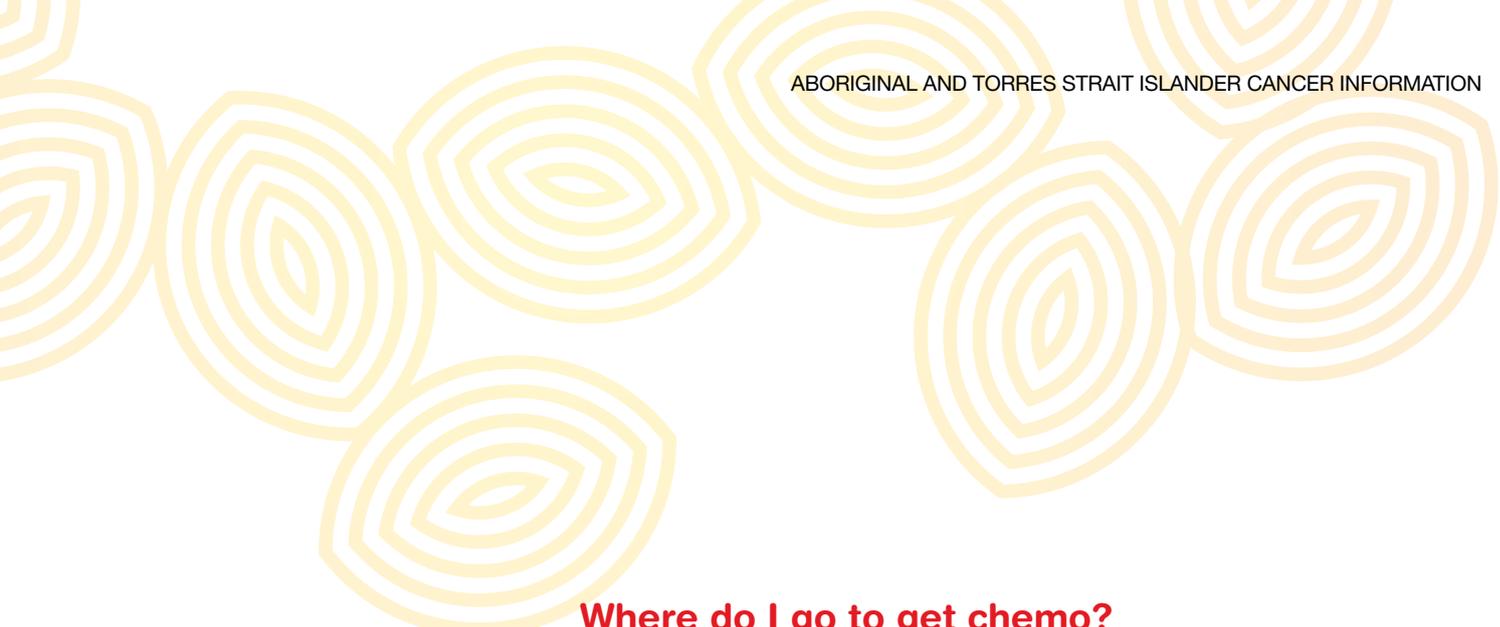
- cure the cancer
- stop the cancer from getting bigger or spreading
- shrink the size of the cancer
- reduce any pain and other problems caused by the cancer.

How do I get chemo?

You can have chemo in a variety of ways.

The most common method is using a needle that puts the medicine straight into your blood. This is done once a day for 5 days. After this you are given 1–4 weeks rest, then the cycle starts again. The doctor will tell you how many cycles and how much rest you need.

Other ways include swallowing tablets or drinking liquid medicine. You may need to take this once or twice a day for a set time.



Your chemotherapy team will help you through the treatment and with any problems you may have.

Where do I go to get chemo?

This will depend on the type of cancer you have. It may be in a hospital or at home.

How long will I have chemo?

Your doctor (called a medical oncologist) will tell you how long you will have chemotherapy. This will depend on:

- the type of cancer you have
- the type of medicine given to you by your doctor
- how you feel when you are getting chemotherapy

How will the chemo affect my body?

Chemotherapy medicines are really strong so they can kill the cancer in your body. Sometimes these medicines can affect how you look and feel.

Your doctor will tell you what to expect, but some people:

- feel a little to very tired
- have nausea and may want to vomit (spu)
- have a sore mouth and throat
- may find their body hair may fall out
- may have some pain/numbness or tingling
- have an increased risk of getting infections

Women may find they have changes in their menstruation periods. Many of these can be treated, and often go away after treatment ends.

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Surgery

It's also called an operation. What type of surgery you have will depend on the size and location of the cancer and if it has spread in your body.

What is surgery?

- It is a common way of removing some cancers but sometimes the whole organ is removed.
- Not all cancers can be removed or reduced with surgery.

Why do I need it?

Because your body cannot fix cancer by itself, doctors may use surgery to:

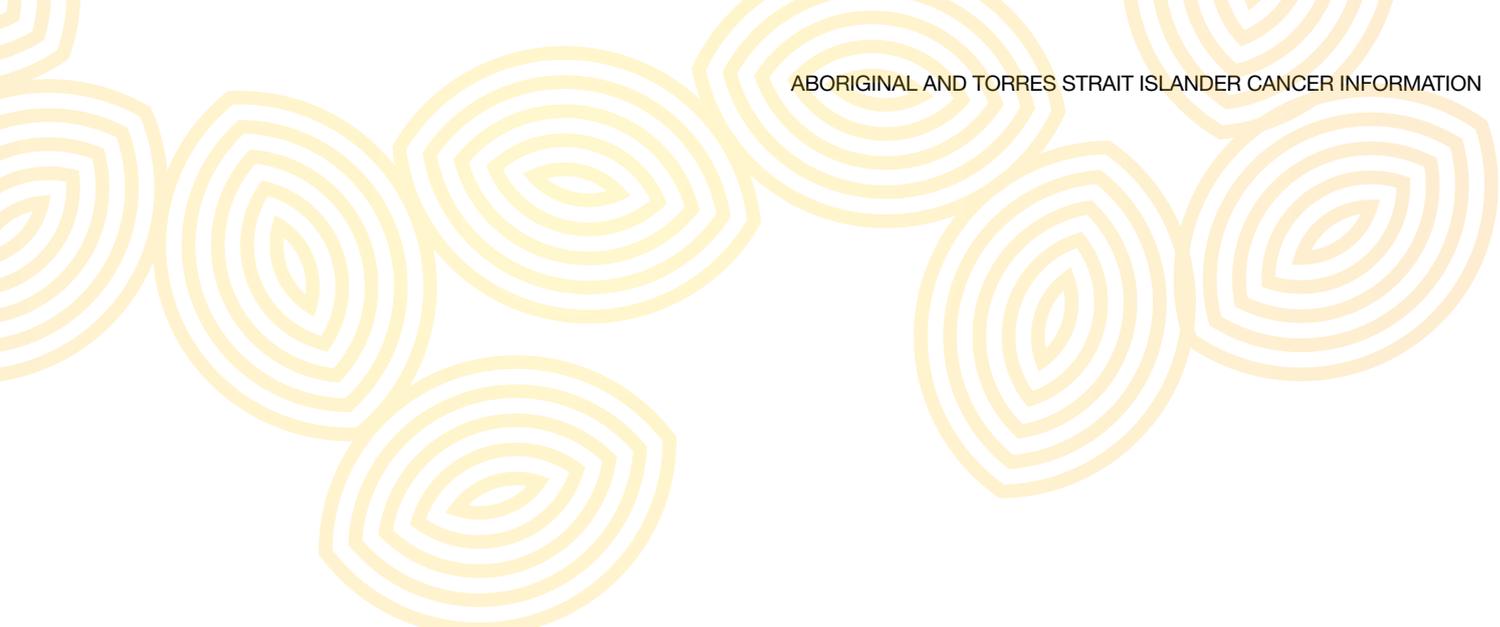
- cure the cancer
- make the cancer smaller
- reduce any pain caused by the cancer
- reduce symptoms by dealing with local problems caused by the cancer

Sometimes, the doctor may do surgery to find out more about the cancer. Surgery may be combined with other cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

How do I have surgery?

There are different types of surgery for cancer.

You may need to see some doctors and nurses involved in your care before the surgery (pre-admission clinic) and have some routine tests (blood tests, breathing test). These tests and the surgery may happen before or at the same time as hospital admission.



You will have surgery at a hospital. This may not be at your local hospital if you need a special team to look after you.

How long will the surgery take?

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Your doctor will tell you how long it will take, but this will depend on:

- the type of cancer you have
- if the cancer has spread to more than one place in the your body
- if you need glands removed.

Sometimes these things are decided during surgery.

How will the surgery affect my body?

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The doctor will help you to go to sleep before they start the surgery by giving your medication. After the surgery, when you wake up, you may be a bit sleepy and have:

- a drip in your arm (to help give you medicine and fluids)
- a tube to drain fluid away
- you may need medicine to help with any pain or sickness
- you may need to do special breathing or other exercises to help you with recovery
- you may feel a bit sick and sleepy

How long will I be in hospital?

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Depending on your surgery, you may stay in hospital for a few days until you feel better. You may have to come back to the hospital for a check-up within a week or two. If you are discharged home, community nurses may be able to visit you at home.

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Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy, also called radio or radiation therapy, uses high energy rays to treat cancer.

What is radiotherapy?

- It is a course of high energy rays. They are like rays of light. You cannot feel them. They are painless.
- It is a common way to treat cancer.
- It works in the area of your body where the cancer is.

Why do I need it?

Because your body cannot fix cancer by itself, doctors use radiotherapy to target and kill cancer.

This treatment may help to:

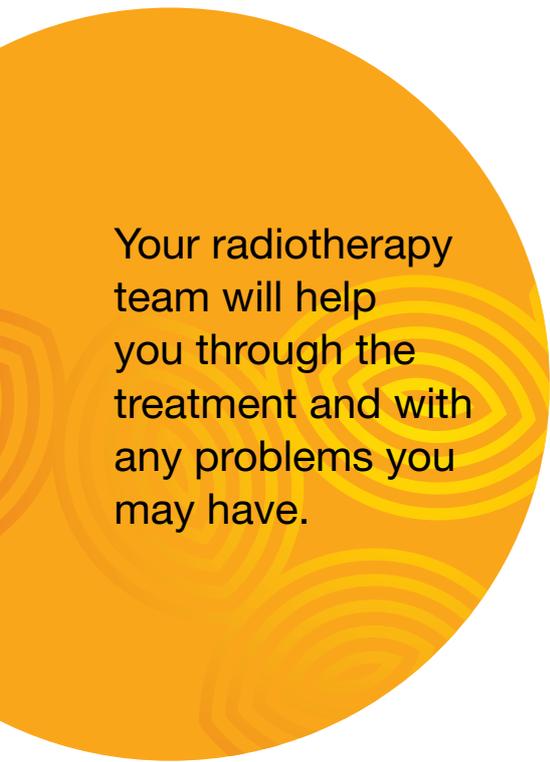
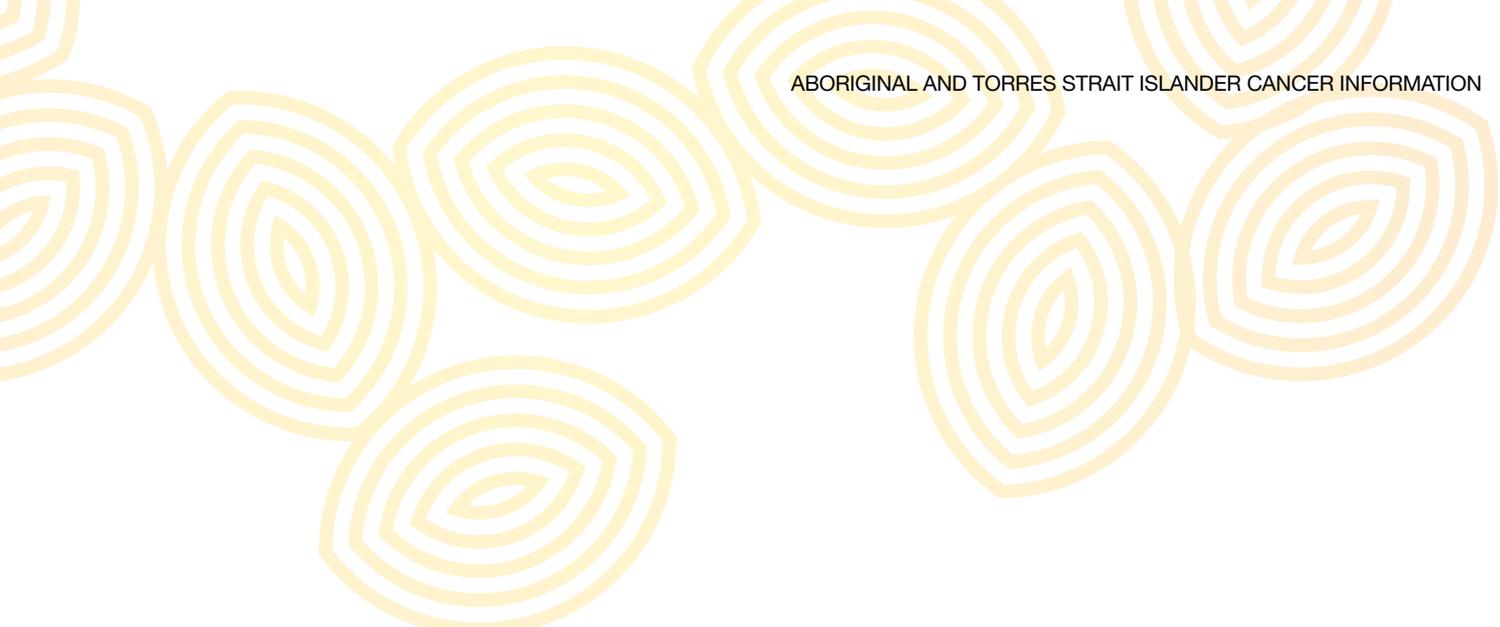
- cure the cancer
- shrink or stop the cancer from getting bigger
- control the spread of the cancer
- reduce any pain and other problems caused by the cancer.

How do I get radio?

There are two types of radiotherapy that your doctor may recommend, depending on your cancer:

Internal radiation: Doctors put small x-ray seeds inside the body, directly on the cancer, to treat the cancer. This may require minor surgery.

External beam radiation: Doctors use a machine to target the cancer from outside the body. You lie still on a table. The machine will move around you and stop at different times to put high energy rays into the cancer.



Your radiotherapy team will help you through the treatment and with any problems you may have.

Where do I go to get radio?

You will have radiotherapy at a cancer centre in a hospital. A radiation oncologist (radiation doctor) and a radiation therapist (delivers the treatment) will work together to give you the radiotherapy safely and reduce side effects.

How long will I have radio?

It is usually given once a day for several weeks.

How will the radio affect my body?

Radiotherapy needs to be strong to kill the cancer in your body, and sometimes it can affect how you look and feel during the treatment.

What you feel depends on where the radiation is going in the body. Your doctor will tell you what side effects you may have. Most go away in 4–6 weeks. Some people:

- feel tired
- have itchy skin on the body part receiving the radiation
- loose body hair.

If you are having radiation in the:

- chest – you may have a cough
- head or neck – you may get a dry mouth and thickened saliva
- upper tummy – your stomach may become upset
- a little lower – your bowel or bladder may be affected.

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