

Radiation Therapy: Information for Patients and Caregivers

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For majority of cases of skin cancers, surgery is the mainstay of treatment. However, there are certain situations where radiation therapy may be indicated and used as part of the treatment plan. Radiation therapy is a treatment that uses high doses of radiation with high energy particles to help kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. Radiation therapy is considered and used in a variety of situations.

Primarily, it is considered for large or aggressive forms of skin cancer. It can also be used in situations where a tumor is inoperable or for those patients whom surgery is not desired or not recommended.¹ Radiation therapy can be used in a combination of other cancer treatments as well, such as surgery or chemotherapy. If curing a patient's cancer is difficult or not possible, radiation therapy can also be used as part of palliative approach in order to help shrink tumors to reduce the symptoms such as pressure and pain that a patient may be experiencing.

Radiation oncologists are physicians who specialize in the treatment of cancers using radiation therapy. They will be part of a patient's multidisciplinary team and helping to guide and coordinate care. In addition to a radiation oncologist, there will be multiple highly trained team members, such as a radiation therapy nurse, a radiation physicist, and many others, involved in the coordination of treatment.²

Radiation therapy can be given in three different ways, through external beam radiation, internal radiation, also known as brachytherapy, or systemic radiation.³ The choice of treatment depends on the kind of cancer, location, and a variety of other factors that will be taken into account by the multidisciplinary team when creating a treatment plan.

There can be several side effects that patients experience after radiation therapy such as nausea, fatigue, skin changes, loss of appetite, hair loss, headache, and several others. These side effects usually subside after treatment, but some side effects can remain. It is important for patients and caregivers to be aware of side effects and discuss them thoroughly with their provider.

¹ *Radiation therapy for cancer*. Radiation Therapy for Cancer - NCI. (n.d.).
<https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/types/radiation-therapy>.

² *How radiation therapy is used to treat cancer*. American Cancer Society. (n.d.).
<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/radiation/basics.html>

³ *Radiation therapy for cancer*. Radiation Therapy for Cancer - NCI. (n.d.).
<https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/types/radiation-therapy>