

Combined Chemotherapy and Radiation for Patients with Esophageal Cancer

In the treatment called chemo-radiation, you will get both chemotherapy and radiation at the same time. Chemotherapy weakens the cancer cells which helps radiation to work better.

Your treatment team consists of your medical oncologist and your radiation oncologist. They work as a team to plan the best treatment approach with chemotherapy and radiation. You will be involved in your treatment planning decisions for chemotherapy and radiation.

How is chemotherapy given?

Chemotherapy is given into a vein (IV). You will get your chemotherapy slowly for several days. Chemotherapy may also be taken orally (by mouth). How you get your chemotherapy will be discussed with you by your doctor or nurse.

What happens during radiation therapy?

First, you will have a radiation planning appointment (called simulation) before starting radiation. Your radiation treatment is planned specifically for you.

Radiation treatments are given five days per week—Monday through Friday. During your five weeks of treatment, you will get a total of 25 to 30 radiation treatments.

The radiation will treat your chest or abdomen, depending on the location of your tumor. The radiation only affects the area of your body being treated.

You will not be radioactive and will not expose anyone to radiation.

What side effects can I expect?

You will not feel the radiation treatment and you should not feel the chemotherapy while it is running. However, you may develop some side effects during your treatment from chemotherapy and radiation.

You may have mild or no side effects during the early part of treatment. Side effects can get worse over time and may be more noticeable during the second half of your treatment.

The most common side effects are:

- Mouth sores
- Pain in your throat or chest when swallowing
- Loss of interest in eating
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Fatigue
- Rash or dry skin in the radiation area
- Low blood counts

Medications will be prescribed by your medical oncologist, radiation oncologist, or nurse practitioner that can relieve the symptoms of side effects. It is important to let your nurse or doctor know about any side effects you have as soon as they start.

How can I help myself during therapy?

- Make an appointment to see a dietitian during the early part of your treatment. Our staff can help you contact the dietitian, or offer other help. Being able to eat and drink comfortably during treatment will make you feel better.
- Please tell your nurse or doctor about any discomfort when you swallow. There are several things that can be done to relieve these symptoms.
- Use an unscented, moisturizing soap when washing your skin in the area of your radiation treatment. Use a soft cloth and do not scrub. Please check with your radiation nurse before using any lotions on your skin. Tell your nurse if you develop a rash or dry skin in the area being treated.
- Light exercise, such as walking, will help you feel better during treatment and give you more energy.

Let your nurse or doctor know right away if you have:

- Soreness, redness, or leaking around your port site
- Fever or shaking chills

Other problems you should let us know about:

- Decreased appetite
- Trouble keeping food down
- Nausea or upset stomach
- Difficulty or pain with swallowing
- Mouth sores
- Diarrhea
- Discomfort with eating only

How often will I see my treatment team?

You will see your medical oncologist or nurse practitioner, your radiation oncologist, and radiation nurse once a week. During these appointments, we will check your weight, general health, and response to treatment. This is a good time to let us know about any concerns or problems that you have.

During the week, your nurse in radiation oncology will check in with you. You can speak with your nurse any time you are in radiation oncology, or by phone. If you need to speak with someone, the front desk staff can page your nurse for you.

You and your health care providers work as a team. You are the most important member of this team. Please share any concerns, issues, or suggestions with us. Our goal is to provide the best care possible to help you successfully complete your treatment.

Who do I call if I have problems at home?

Pump problems:

24-hour Helpline (800) 315-3287

Problems with side effects:

Radiation oncology: (617) 726-8650

Primary Nurse in Radiation Oncology

Infusion unit: (617) 724-2277

Primary Nurse in infusion



MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL

CANCER CENTER