**Part 2: Understanding Radiation Therapy**

**“What to expect after radiation therapy”**

If you have received external beam radiation therapy, you will not be radioactive after treatment. It is safe to be in contact with other people including pregnant women and children.

If you have received internal radiation therapy (or brachytherapy), the device introduced inside you may produce small amounts of radiation outside your body. Your treating team will give you instructions for precautions that may be required after your treatment.

Depending on the position of your cancer and which form of radiation therapy treatment you are receiving, you may experience side effects. Most commonly is tiredness and feeling worn out; and symptoms directly to the site you have received treatment such as skin dryness, irritation and hair loss. Because cancer cells can continue to die for weeks or months following radiation therapy, these side effects may increase as treatment goes on, or persist after it has ended. Most side effects should gradually disappear, but in the meantime talk to your treating team about how you are feeling as they can help to effectively manage them.

You may notice changes to your body image or a decrease in your sexual drive; and depending on the targeted area of your therapy it may be recommended that you avoid intercourse altogether during treatment - so best to check first with your doctor.  Touch, cuddling and gentle massage are ways to connect and maintain intimacy without having intercourse.

If you have been told it is safe to continue with sexual intercourse during treatment, it is important to use contraception to avoid getting pregnant or fathering a child. Some women may experience vaginal dryness, for which lubricants such as KY jelly can be used, while men may experience erectile dysfunction. Notify your treating team if these symptoms are ongoing or new and unexpected.

**“What you can do to help your recovery”**

There are extra things you can do to stay healthy and safe when out and about.

* Try to keep active with 30-60 minutes of light exercise per day, such as walking.
* Maintain safe social distancing, or wear a surgical mask when avoiding crowds is not possible
* Be considerate of what you are breathing in. Avoid tobacco smoke and dusty construction sites, as these can increase your exposure to respiratory infections

Practicing good hand hygiene can dramatically reduce germs. Wash your hands or use hand sanitiser:

* After using the toilet
* Before and after meal preparation, eating or taking medication
* After sneezing, coughing or nose blowing
* After touching objects, pets, or other people

Talk to your specialist about what vaccines you need, such as the flu vaccine, which can provide you with extra protection.

Although you may experience a decreased appetite, it is important to choose foods that will help in regaining strength. You also need to stay hydrated with at least 2 litres of caffeine-free fluids per day, unless your doctor has restricted your fluid intake. Small meals regularly or eating plain foods is better than having nothing at all.

**“When to seek help”**

There are some symptoms that you should seek help urgently for, by attending the emergency department immediately. These include:

* Breathing difficulties
* Uncontrolled bleeding; or
* Pain not controlled with your prescribed medication

Any other symptoms you begin to experience should be discussed with your treating team or nurse on call, which may include but are not limited to:

* Temperature of 38C or higher
* Chills, sweats, shivers or shakes
* Nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea
* Headache, dizziness or blurred vision
* Increased confusion
* Sore throat, cough or cold
* Mouth sores
* Skin irritations; or
* Pain or blood when passing urine

Finally, if you feel overwhelmed or emotional about your treatment please speak with your treating team as they can recommend supports that are available.