

Department of Nutrition and Dietetics

Diet and Cancer Care: Dietary advice for patients receiving radiotherapy to the pelvis area

This information is part of a series of suggestions for adults to help manage wind and diarrhoea during radiotherapy to the pelvic area and as a result reduce treatment interruptions.

If you do not have any symptoms like wind, diarrhoea, weight loss or constipation and are not having treatment interruptions, then continue with your normal eating habits.

Production of wind (or flatulence) is a natural part of the digestion process. Everyone has gas or wind in their large bowel which is normal. However, a build-up of wind in the bowel can be uncomfortable and could affect the accuracy of the radiotherapy by interfering with the treatment field.

Gas in the large bowel is from two main sources: swallowed air and the breakdown of undigested food by gut bacteria in the large bowel. The amount of wind we produce can depend on the food that we eat and the digestive process.

About 90% of the gas in our digestive tract is from swallowing air whilst eating or drinking. Some of this air leaves the stomach by burping or belching. The rest passes through the bowel and is released through the rectum.



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The following will help reduce the amount of swallowed air:

- Eat food slowly and do not rush whilst eating.
- Chew food well and with your mouth closed.
- Avoid gulping fluids and sucking through a straw. Wherever possible drink from a glass or cup.
- Try drinking lukewarm instead of hot drinks as air is swallowed when hot drinks are sipped.
- Avoid drinks like fizzy drinks, carbonated water and beer.
- Avoid chewing gum.

The rest of the gas is produced by gut bacteria by breaking down undigested fibre and carbohydrate in the large bowel. Most people generally know which foods they can tolerate well and which foods cause them to pass more wind.

To help reduce wind produced in the large bowel:

- Aim to eat small meals at regular intervals.
- Avoid fasting and long gaps between meals.
- Certain foods may increase wind production (see list below).
- Try to limit these foods if wind produced interferes with the radiotherapy treatment:
 - Brussell sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, radish, spinach, beans, peas and onions.
 - Beans, pulses, sweetcorn, lentils and nuts.
 - Beer, lager and fizzy drinks.
 - Artificial sweeteners that contain xylitol, sorbitol and mannitol.

A food and symptom diary may help you to identify which foods usually make the symptoms worse.

- Peppermint oil capsules (available to buy over the counter or on prescription), peppermint tea, cardamom and ginger are natural remedies to help alleviate wind.
- Live yogurts like probiotics – there is some evidence that probiotics may help with wind during radiotherapy. However, if you are having

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chemotherapy as well, ask to speak to a dietitian or doctor who may be able to advise on this.

- Regular and gentle physical activity as tolerated during radiotherapy also helps move any trapped wind in the large bowel.
- Constipation will also cause wind and bloating. Make sure you open your bowels regularly so that the gas does not remain trapped in your bowel. You may need some medication if you get constipated frequently.
- The type of medication used to relieve constipation may also cause wind, such as lactulose. Speak to your doctor if you have any concerns regarding your medication who will review the tablets that you are taking and may consider alternative options.

Radiotherapy to the pelvic area can increase the amount of times you go to the toilet to open your bowels or give you less control of your bowel.

Diarrhoea is passing looser or more frequent stools than is normal for you.

If you have loose stools, the following may help ease it:

- Drink enough fluids to help replace the fluids lost from diarrhoea. Aim for at least 10-12 drinks per day.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine.
- Cut down spicy foods like chilli, cayenne, jalapeno, mustard and black pepper.
- When you have diarrhoea, choosing foods like white bread, rice krispies, rice puffs, cornflakes, boiled rice, rice noodles, boiled potatoes, chicken, fish, eggs, softly cooked vegetables and canned fruits might help to maintain nutrition. Eating 5-6 small meals might be easier than having 3 big meals.
- Eat more soluble fibre, a type of fibre that can help thicken the consistency of stools eg. White rice, apples and pears without skin, apple sauce, oatmeal, smooth peanut butter and ripe banana.
- Limit foods high in insoluble fibre (roughage) which increase stool volume e.g. Wholegrain cereals, wholemeal bread, bran, nuts, seeds, raw vegetables and fruits with skin until diarrhoea settles.
- If diarrhoea does not settle, speak to your radiographer or doctor who will consider prescribing tablets to help control it. It is important

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to manage diarrhoea during treatment to avoid weight loss and treatment interruptions.

Remember to reintroduce foods back into your diet gradually once you finish radiotherapy.

If this advice has not helped you to reduce wind or manage loose stools, or if you are losing weight whilst on radiotherapy, then you would benefit from individual dietetic advice – Ask your radiographers to refer you to Macmillan dietitians for further advice.

Local dietetic department contact details:

Coventry Dietitians	02476966161
Nuneaton Dietitians	02476865098
Redditch and Bromsgrove Dietitians	01527512043
Warwick Dietitians	01926495321 extension 4258

This information has been produced by Coventry Macmillan Dietitians, University Hospitals Coventry & Warwickshire NHS Trust.

Other useful resources:

Abdominal or pelvic radiotherapy – www.cancerresearchuk.org

Pelvic radiotherapy – www.macmillan.org.uk

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