

YOUR RADIATION THERAPY TEAM

Radiation therapy is an important part of many cancer patients' total treatment plan. During your treatments, carefully targeted and measured doses of radiation are administered to your body. The radiation produces highly energized ions that gradually shrink and destroy cancer cells. As a radiation therapy patient, you typically will receive treatments five days per week over a period of four to seven weeks.

This kind of therapy requires coordinated care by a team of radiation oncology professionals. In addition to your primary care physician, the team may include a radiation oncologist, a medical dosimetrist, a radiation therapist, an oncology nurse and a medical physicist. Together, this skilled and experienced team prescribes, plans, administers and monitors your radiation treatments and teaches you about cancer care. Each team member has a specific role and specialized education.

The radiation oncologist is a physician who specializes in cancer treatment. He or she has completed a four-year medical degree plus a four-year residency in radiation oncology. Most radiation oncologists are certified by the American Board of Radiology. The radiation oncologist consults with your primary care physician to prescribe an individualized radiation treatment plan.

Based on the radiation oncologist's prescription, the medical dosimetrist calculates the dose for each treatment and plans how to deliver the dose to the area where the cancer is located. The medical dosimetrist's role is to design treatments that effectively target cancer cells while sparing normal cells. Medical dosimetrists are educated in physics, anatomy and radiobiology. They may be certified by the Medical Dosimetry Certification Board.

The radiation therapist administers radiation treatments to the patient. He or she prepares the patient for each treatment, applies the radiation, records and verifies each treatment and monitors the patient during treatment. Radiation therapists complete two- or four-year professional educational programs focusing on physics, radiation safety, anatomy and patient care. They are certified by the American Registry of Radiologic Technologists.

The oncology nurse completes the radiation treatment team. He or she educates cancer patients and their families, monitors patients for signs and symptoms related to radiation therapy and performs nutrition analyses. Oncology nurses are registered nurses with specialized experience in caring for cancer patients. Depending on their education and experience levels, they may hold one of several certifications through the Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation.

In addition to verifying the dose calculations, the medical physicist checks that the equipment used to deliver the treatments is calibrated correctly and working properly. He or she has bachelor's, master's or doctorate degree in medical physics.

If you have questions about your radiation therapy treatments, ask your radiation therapist. Depending on the nature of the question, your therapist may refer you to your radiation oncologist or another member of the treatment team.

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