Radiation Therapy – Anorexia, nausea and vomiting

Poor appetite, nausea and vomiting are all common effects associated with cancer treatment. They are not as common as widely believed, but for those who experience them, they can be debilitating. Sometimes these problems are caused by the cancer itself and not the treatment. Often, weight loss and dehydration make these problems worse. However, patients who receive radiation therapy to the upper abdomen may get these effects directly from treatment.

Recommendations for anorexia, nausea and vomiting:

• Eat small, frequent meals to avoid that overly full feeling. We encourage the use of nutritional supplements such as Ensure, Sustacal, etc.
• Eat and drink slowly. If you are nauseated, drinking liquids rapidly increases the chance of vomiting.
• Eat easy to prepare meals. Have a friend or relative prepare meals. Plan ahead and fix snacks that can be eaten without much preparation. Eat whenever you are hungry.
• Cold or room temperature foods may be more tolerable than very hot food. The odors of hot foods may worsen the feeling of nausea.
• Cooking odors may also increase nausea, particularly the smells of frying or grilling meat. Stay away from these and eat more non-red meat products. Foods like eggs, noodles, pasta, potatoes, tuna, peanut butter and cheese may not create smells that trigger nausea.
• Avoid excessive activity after a meal. Activity slows the digestion process and increases discomfort.
• Clear, cool drinks are best when nausea is present. Try 7-Up, ginger ale, Kool-Aid, Jello, popsicles or sherbet. Stay away from milk and milk products which can increase nausea and mucus production.
• Crackers, dry toast, broth, or soup may reduce nausea, particularly after periods of rest. It may be helpful to keep crackers at the bedside to eat when first waking up and before getting out of bed.
• If you are given a prescription medicine for appetite or nausea, make sure to use it as prescribed and let us know if it helps.

The services of a dietitian are available at MercyOne Waterloo Cancer Center. You may be referred by your doctor, but feel free to ask for a consultation if you desire.