Radiation Therapy – Diarrhea and Proctitis

Diarrhea and proctitis (inflammation of the lining of the rectum) are common following radiation therapy to the abdomen and pelvis. Diarrhea and proctitis are not the same thing, although chronic diarrhea may cause or worsen proctitis. Diarrhea is when you have frequent, watery bowel movements. It may be accompanied by gas and cramping. Proctitis causes rectal irritation, pain, burning and sometimes bleeding. It may be associated with having small, frequent, formed stools. Your treatment may cause one or both. Most patients do not get these side effects until the second week of treatment and they usually go away three to four weeks after treatment is complete. Chemotherapy may make diarrhea worse or occur sooner than with radiation alone. These are some suggestions you can use to help ease these side effects.

Recommendations for diarrhea:

- Eat an easily digestible, low fiber diet high in protein and carbohydrates. Avoid foods with seeds, nuts or tough skins. Minimize raw fruits and vegetables. It is reported that adding nutmeg to food may slow down the action of the bowels.
- Avoid foods that often cause bowel upset in adults. This includes milk and highly-spiced food. Yogurt and cheese generally do not cause problems and can be eaten. Avoid any food you know has caused you diarrhea in the past.
- Skip the coffee – it is a natural laxative.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco.
- Drink plenty of fluids – at least two to three quarts a day. Fluids like apple juice, grape juice, Kool-Aid, 7-Up, Gatorade and ginger ale are recommended. Sip liquids slowly.
- Eat small, frequent meals. Do not skip meals.
- If the diarrhea continues, ask your doctor or nurse about using Imodium A-D (generic name – loperamide). If you are given a prescription medicine, use it as directed and be sure to let us know if it helps.
- A dietitian is available at MercyOne Waterloo Cancer Center. We can schedule a consultation if you have specific dietary questions, requests or needs.

Recommendations for proctitis:

- Keep the skin around the rectum as clean and dry as possible. Use baby wipes, Tucks pads or sitz baths after bowel movements as needed.
- Take sitz baths three to four times a day for comfort. Use our sitz bath recommendations.
- Control diarrhea. Oral medications may help with diarrhea, but they generally do NOT help resolve proctitis symptoms.
- Do NOT use over-the-counter hemorrhoid products without asking your doctor or nurse in Radiation Oncology first. Some of these products can make things worse. You may use Tucks pads as frequently as you choose. If you are given a prescription, make sure to use it as directed and let us know how it works.