Taste Changes
Your sense of taste may change during treatment. Food may taste different. Food and beverages may have a metallic taste. Taste may improve two to six months after treatments are completed.

Ear Problems
If your ears are part of the treatment area, you may experience some ear irritation or hearing problems. Sometimes the ear canals may become dry, itchy and irritated during treatment. DO NOT put cotton swabs or other foreign matter into the ear canal. Notify your physician, nurse or therapist of ear problems or loss of hearing.

Fighting Fatigue
Fatigue is common during radiation therapy. Stress related to your illness, daily trips for treatment, and the effects of radiation on your body’s normal cells all contribute to fatigue. The amount of fatigue you experience will go away slowly after your treatment is completed. Avoid becoming overly tired. Pace your activities, planning rest periods in between them.

Other Side Effects
It is possible that the radiation could affect your bone marrow, where blood cells are made. Your physician may order a CBC (complete blood count) during your treatment to check for any changes.

The radiation will cause hair loss in the treatment area. The hair loss will begin about two weeks after the treatments have started. Hair will usually begin to grow again two to three months after your treatments are completed.

Other less common side effects may also occur. Notify your physician, nurse or therapist if you have any problems not mentioned in this brochure.

After Treatment
Side effects of the radiation may continue for several weeks after the treatments are completed. Continue to clean the treatment area gently and protect it from the sun. Notify your physician or nurse of any breaks in the skin or discharge from the skin. Protect your skin in the treatment area from the sun for up to one year.

Continue your mouth care until the symptoms go away. Notify your physician or nurse if you develop a fever or white patches in your mouth.

Monitor your weight and notify your physician or nurse of any continued weight loss.

Support Services
In addition to the radiation oncology staff, other health care professionals are available to assist you:

- Our spiritual care team can provide individual and family support in meeting your religious needs.
- Our behavioral health team is experienced in helping you and your family cope with your emotions related to your illness.
- Our nutritional support team is available to assist with your nutritional needs related to your disease and treatment process.
- Our complementary therapy program offers patients individual consultations on developing coping and wellness support strategies for use before, during and after treatments.

Advanced treatment options, dedicated professionals and a unique caring environment make St. Peter’s one of the most well-regarded health systems.

In recent years, St. Peter’s Hospital has been recognized by national and state health care quality organizations for excellence in care. We offer a comprehensive, integrated continuum of services – ranging from acute care in the hospital to outpatient services, home care, nursing homes, hospice care, addictions treatment and much more.

St. Peter’s continues to set the pace for health care innovations. We are 4,500 professionals who know that technology is critical to treatment, but compassion is the key to healing.
You will be given ______ treatments in your course of therapy. This will take about ______ weeks. Your physician may wish to change the number of treatments as your course progresses. They will discuss any changes to the plan with you during your weekly visit.

Your radiation treatments have been carefully planned to direct the radiation to the specific area where the cancer was found. However, it is expected that some normal cells in the surrounding area will also be affected. This may result in some side effects that will vary with each patient and will usually go away slowly after your treatment is completed. Those side effects and self-care instructions are discussed in this brochure.

Your Privacy During Treatment

During radiation therapy, the radiation must pass directly through your skin in order to reach the tumor. To make this possible, you will be asked to remove any clothing or accessory from the treatment area. Your privacy will be maintained to the highest degree possible.

What are the Most Common Side Effects in Patients Receiving Radiation to the Head and Neck?

- Skin reaction
- Sore mouth and throat
- Dry mouth
- Taste changes
- Ear problems
- Fatigue

Treating Skin Reaction

Ask your physician or nurse about things you can do to protect your skin before your radiation treatments begin.

The radiation treatments may cause you to develop skin reactions such as redness, dryness, itching, peeling or tanning. It is important that you DO NOT scratch these areas.

You should follow these instructions:

- You may clean the treatment area using a mild soap that does not contain perfume or deodorant. Avoid scrubbing. Rinse well and gently pat the area dry with a soft towel.
- Do not use any cosmetics, powders, creams or lotions on the treatment area unless prescribed by your physician. Wearing jewelry on the treatment area may irritate the skin.
- Wear shirts, blouses, and neck scarves made of soft material. Avoid starch and clothing that rubs the treatment area.
- Avoid over-the-counter mouthwashes. After eating and at bedtime, gently brush your teeth and gums with a soft toothbrush. After brushing and between meals, cleanse your mouth with a rinse made of one level teaspoon of salt and one level teaspoon of baking soda in a quart of warm water. This will also be helpful if your saliva is thick.

Sore Mouth and Throat

Your mouth or throat may become sore after the second or third week of treatment. The soreness will slowly go away after the treatments are completed. These suggested self-care tips may help:

- Eat food that is soft, smooth and moist. Food and beverages served at room temperature will be easier to swallow.
- Avoid dry or coarse foods such as crackers, potato chips, popcorn, and raw fruits and vegetables. Also avoid acidic drinks such as orange and tomato juices.
- Avoid alcohol. DO NOT smoke cigarettes or pipes, or chew tobacco.
- Add liquid gravies and sauces to foods to make them easier to swallow.
- It is important that your weight remain fairly stable during radiation. Supplemental feeding may be needed to maintain good nutrition.
- You may need to remove dentures and dental appliances when you are not eating.
- Avoid over-the-counter mouthwashes. After eating and at bedtime, gently brush your teeth and gums with a soft toothbrush. After brushing and between meals, cleanse your mouth with a rinse made of one level teaspoon of salt and one level teaspoon of baking soda in a quart of warm water. This will also be helpful if your saliva is thick.

Dry Mouth

A dry mouth is a common side effect of radiation therapy. For some people, this side effect will remain even after the treatments have stopped.

Special attention to dental care is needed to prevent tooth decay and gum disease that may occur as a result of decreased saliva. Before you start radiation treatments, your physician may advise you to see your dentist for a checkup. After your treatments are completed, be sure to tell any dentists you visit that you have received radiation therapy.

To keep your mouth moist, try these self-care tips:

- Drink plenty of fluids – eight to 10 glasses a day. For a very dry mouth, you may want to carry a water bottle with you to wet your mouth. Frequent use of a salt and baking soda mouth rinse (described in the previous section) will also help.
- Use a cool-mist vaporizer at your bedside and in the main living area during the day.
- Chewing sugarless gum or sucking sugarless hard candy may increase saliva.
- Apply lip balm as needed for dry lips. Avoid products containing alcohol or petroleum jelly.

- If swallowing pills becomes difficult, tell your physician. If needed, ask your nurse or physician about medications that can help you swallow or manage any pain you may experience.
- Notify your physician, nurse, or therapist if you develop any white, patchy areas or blisters in your mouth, or blisters on your lips.

The ability to eat may be severely affected. To maintain good nutrition, a feeding tube (PEG or G-tube) may be placed in the stomach.