Rectal Cancer Treatment Overview

The purpose of this overview is to give you an idea of the usual treatment for rectal cancer. Not all people are the same so treatments can be different. If you have questions about your treatment, ask your surgeon, cancer patient navigator, cancer doctor or cancer nurse.

Now that you know that you have rectal cancer

- Your doctor may now book you for more tests, including a CT scan, an MRI, bloodwork, and a colonoscopy, if you have not already had one.

- If your doctor is not a rectal cancer surgeon, you will be referred to a rectal cancer surgeon.

- Your doctor should also refer you to the cancer patient navigator. You should expect to hear from the cancer patient navigator within a week. You can also reach your cancer patient navigator by calling 1-888-524-1234.

- When you meet with the cancer patient navigator, she will review the “Blue Ribbon” rectal cancer information kit with you and answer your questions. She will also ask how you are coping and what supports you need.

Staging

Your test results tell your doctor the “stage” of your cancer. Sometimes, the stage will not be known until after you have surgery.

Staging helps your doctor recommend the best treatment plan for you.

Ask your doctor the stage of your cancer.

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Recommended treatment by stage:

If you have Stage I (stage one) rectal cancer, your only treatment will be surgery.

If you have Stage II (stage two) or Stage III (stage three) rectal cancer, treatment will usually be a combination of chemotherapy, radiation therapy and surgery. Most patients have chemotherapy and radiation therapy before surgery (see page 3 of this pathway). Sometimes the chemotherapy and radiation therapy is given after surgery. Your doctor will refer you to a cancer doctor to discuss the treatment options that are best for you.

If you have Stage IV (stage four) rectal cancer, your treatment plan will be based on your needs. Your doctor may refer you to a cancer doctor.

At this time, your cancer patient navigator can help you:
- Understand your treatment options
- Cope with your concerns
- Make arrangements to go to the cancer centre

Follow up

When your treatment is finished, the cancer doctors and nurses will give you information about your long term follow up care (also called “Survivorship Care”).

Your family doctor and surgeon will work together to provide your long term follow up care.

If you are worried about whether rectal cancer runs in your family, ask your doctor about a referral to Medical Genetics. See the handout “Could the Colon or Rectal Cancer in My Family be Hereditary?” for more information.
Stage II and III Rectal Cancer Treatment Overview

The purpose of this overview is to give you an idea of the usual treatment for Stage II and Stage III rectal cancer. Not all people are the same so treatments can be different.

Ask your doctor or cancer patient navigator about your treatment plans. You can also read the Blue Ribbon Kit for more information about treatment. The doctors and nurses at the cancer centre will also give you more information about your treatment.

Chemotherapy and Radiation Therapy: Most patients with Stage II and Stage III rectal cancer will have chemotherapy and radiation therapy before surgery. This treatment usually lasts about 6 weeks. You can only have radiation therapy at the cancer centres in Halifax and Sydney.

If you need assistance in making arrangements to go to the cancer centre, your Cancer Patient Navigator can help you.

Surgery: Most patients will have surgery 6-10 weeks after their chemotherapy and radiation therapy is finished.

Many rectal cancer patients will need an ostomy. This may be permanent or temporary. Ask your surgeon for more information. If an ostomy is planned for you, your surgeon will refer you to an Enterostomal Therapy Nurse to help you learn about how to care for your ostomy.

You will also see a dietitian to learn how to eat well when you have an ostomy.

You may also find it helpful to talk to someone who has had an ostomy. Contact the Ostomy Canada Society at www.ostomycanada.ca or call 1-888-969-9698.

More Chemotherapy: If you had chemotherapy and radiation before your operation, you will likely have more chemotherapy after you have recovered from your surgery. This usually lasts at least 4 months.

You should talk to your cancer doctor about the type of chemotherapy that is best for you and where you can have it.

What if I didn’t have chemotherapy and radiation before surgery? If you did not have chemotherapy or radiation therapy before your surgery, you may have it afterwards. This decision will be based on the information in the pathology report from your surgery.

Follow-up: See page 2 of this pathway.