

Patient Education

Radiation Medicine Department

Brain Tumors: Treatment

Treatment

Treatment depends on a number of factors, including the type, location, size, and grade of the tumor. For some types of brain cancer, the doctor also needs to know whether cancer cells were found in the cerebrospinal fluid.

People with brain tumors have several treatment options. Depending on the tumor type and *stage*, brain tumors may be treated with:

- Surgery
- Radiation therapy
- Chemotherapy
- A combination of treatments

In addition, at any stage of disease, patients may have treatment to control pain and other symptoms of the cancer, to relieve the side effects of therapy, and to ease emotional problems. This kind of treatment is called symptom management, supportive care, or palliative care.

Surgery

Surgery is the usual treatment for most brain tumors. Surgery to open the skull is called a craniotomy.

Sometimes surgery is not possible. If the tumor is in the brain stem or certain other areas, the surgeon may not be able to remove the tumor without damaging normal brain tissue. Patients who cannot have surgery may receive radiation or other treatment.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy, the use of drugs to kill cancer cells, is sometimes used to treat brain tumors. Chemotherapy may be taken by pill, or it may be put into the body by a needle in the vein or muscle. The side effects of chemotherapy depend mainly on the drugs that are used. The most common side effects include fatigue, constipation, decreased appetite, nausea, and lowered blood counts.

Radiation Therapy

There are two types of radiation therapy.

External Radiation Therapy

External radiation therapy uses a machine called a linear accelerator to deliver a dose of high-energy x-ray to the region of the tumor. These x-rays can destroy the cancer cells, while sparing the surrounding normal tissue.

External beam therapy is painless. You will not see or feel the actual treatment. Most people are treated on an outpatient basis, coming from and returning home after each treatment. Most can even continue with their normal daily activities.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation can be a very important part of the treatment plan. The goals of rehabilitation depend on the person's needs and how the tumor has affected daily activities.

- **Physical therapists**—Brain tumors and their treatment may cause paralysis, weakness and problems with balance. Physical therapists can help you regain strength and balance.
- **Speech therapists**—Speech therapists help those who have trouble speaking, expressing thoughts, or swallowing.
- **Occupational therapists**—Occupational therapists help you learn to manage activities of daily living, such as eating, using the toilet, bathing, and dressing.

Questions to Ask Before Treatment Begins

These are some questions you may want to ask your doctor before having radiation therapy:

- Why do I need this treatment?
- When will the treatments begin? When will they end?
- How will I feel during therapy? Are there side effects?
- What can I do to take care of myself during therapy?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- Will I be able to continue my normal activities during treatment?