

## Hazards of Radiotherapy in Head and Neck Cancers

LK Shankhdhar<sup>1\*</sup>, Kshitij Shankhdhar<sup>2</sup> and Smita Shankhdhar<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Chief Diabetologist- LK Diabetes Centre, India

<sup>2</sup>Diabetologist and Podiatrist- LK Diabetes Centre, India

<sup>3</sup>Diabetologist- LK Diabetes Centre, India

\*Corresponding Author: LK Shankhdhar, Chief Diabetologist- LK Diabetes Centre, India.

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Cancers of Head and neck are treated with combination of Radiotherapy and Chemotherapy. Although results of therapy are quite good but side effects of therapy are many and bothering so much so that many patients fail to complete the course. During counseling the Radio-oncologist explains all side effects for the sake of education but that creates a lot of scare and confusion in the mind of the patient. The consultant does not define clearly as to chronology of side effects. This article aims to present a firsthand account of various effects and side effects of therapy in chronological manner since the patient himself is a physician.

I am a 70-year-old physician-Diabetologist, who is suffering from Chronic Bronchitis for over 50 years. This reminds me of late 1970 when I had such a severe bout of cough that three of my left sided ribs were fractured. My professor of Medicine said that rib fracture is diagnosed with tomogram, facility for which was not present anywhere in India at that time. So mere local pain and tenderness was enough to diagnose rib fracture. Treatment advised by him was also very simple- strap the part with elstocreppe bandage and suppress the cough with anti tussives such as codein. I followed his advice and became all right within a month.

Mention of Chronic Bronchitis was essential because during winters my voice quality and volume used to deteriorate due to cough. I am also very sensitive to icy drinks since they too affected my voice the same way as also enhanced intensity of cough.

Approximately 2 years from now I noticed some cough and deterioration in voice quality. I did not take it seriously but after a month or so I started noticing a new development that I frequently

aspirated during meals, which increased my cough and further deteriorated voice quality. But now I felt a pressing need for endoscopy, so I consulted a gastroenterologist. He found a mass attached to my left Erytenoid fold. Since mass was smooth and looked benign so I could ignore it for some time until a glandular mass appeared in neck on the same side. I immediately went for Fine needle aspiration cytology (FNAC) but the report was misleading as it showed chronic inflammation only. I and the physician who was in my touch, took it as tubercular but I went for opinion of a general surgeon. The surgeon ignored the FNAC report and advised for biopsy of throat lesion as also repeat FNAC of glandular mass, One ENT surgeon did direct laryngoscopy and collected a piece for histo-pahological examination. This time I went for biopsy from a very renowned pathologist. Unfortunately, the pathologist reported that the tissue was scanty but she reported foci of Squamous cell carcinoma.

To be on safer side, now I proceeded to Tata Memorial Cancer hospital in Mumbai and submitted myself for all tests again. There too diagnosis of Squamous cell Carcinoma was sustained. I requested them to refer me to some hospital in my city-Lucknow, since I could not leave my practice for long period of two months for Chemotherapy and Radiotherapy. They referred me to RMLIMS or SGPGI. I selected RMLIMS since it is very close to my residence.

The consultant Radio-oncologist counseled me by telling a few things. He told me that I should receive 35 sessions of radiotherapy from Monday to Friday with Saturday and Sunday off and one session of Chemotherapy every week on Tuesday. He told me that outcome in Squamous cell carcinoma is expected to be superb. Quite

clearly, he told me that side effects of therapy are numerous, and some patients even fail to complete therapy. He told me that most bothering side effects include oral ulcerations due to Mucositis. I was informed that Mucositis could cause redness and ulceration of gums, tongue, palate and throat. Even swallowing and talking might be difficult. There will be overall dryness of mouth due to suppressed parotid function. I assured him of fullest cooperation and proceeded for radiotherapy on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2022. As per established plan, I had to meet the consultant every Monday with reports of CBC, LFT, KFT and Random Blood Glucose.

On the next Monday he enquired of any side effects, and I answered in negative. I must mention at the outset that before therapy was started I was in perfect health and was taking regular 10,000-12,000 steps per day, good appetite and a very busy clinical practice as a Consultant Diabetologist in my family clinic. I could take Cisplatin in Chemotherapy on 2 occasions only and had to stop that due to deteriorating renal profile. Biomab was given on all sessions of chemotherapy. I took all the 35 sessions of radiotherapy which ended on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

Now I will describe the effects and side effects as they appeared in text below.

- Just after single radiotherapy I could feel that the tumor in throat almost disappeared as foreign body sensation was missing by the evening.
- The glandular mass was also reducing in size and it disappeared after 15 days.
- After 7 days of therapy I noticed much relief in swallowing since aspiration almost disappeared.
- Radiation induced Dermatitis was noticed by me after 25 days of therapy. Noticed itching and redness in neck and cheeks. Over a week or so dermatitis became aggressive with hyperpigmentation over neck and even some cracks developed. I was advised to sprinkle Betadine powder over cracks and it worked well as most cracks healed soon. But I could not shave over neck. So I shaved only on cheeks and hid neck with mask. I was advised to apply cream with paraffin and aloe vera on neck even before dermatitis appeared.
- I noticed Alopecia barbae since there was only a strip of hair in the beard region. Hair did not grow on neck too.
- Mucositis was noticed on around 15<sup>th</sup> day after therapy. Due to this I felt a big ulceration on right side of on throat; I may remind that my Carcinoma was on left side. Ulceration over tongue, especially on sides and its attachment with floor of mouth was quite painful. Due to mucositis a lot of thick and marble white sputum was forming which necessitated frequent spitting.
- Anorexia was noticeable by 20<sup>th</sup> day and was so much that I never felt like taking anything. With loss of appetite and poor intake I started losing weight. I lost 10 kg during course of therapy. This was accompanied by increasing weakness, so much so that I could not undertake any regular walk. My daily walking included morning and evening visits to my clinic, which is about 250 steps from my residence.
- Dysphagia due to ulcerations in throat made swallowing painful and I could take only milk 3-4 times a day; thus caloric intake came down to around 400-500 calories per day. Swallowing was associated with referred pain in ipsilateral ear.
- I lost sensation for saltish and sweet things as they appeared tasteless but there was a component of perversion as milk tasted saltish. I noticed this side effect on around 20<sup>th</sup> day of therapy.
- Due to inflammation and ulceration of gums, I could not brush my teeth, instead rubbed toothpaste with index finger. Despite three- four times oral washes with Benzylamine containing solution mixed water, I could not maintain good oral hygiene. Even few teeth started paining after about 25 days of therapy.
- I also noticed that edges of my teeth became sharper and caused ulceration of tip and sides of tongue as also inside of cheeks.
- Regression of side effects: After completion of therapy, I keenly waited for regression of side effects.
- Effect of radiation-induced dermatitis was fading fast and disappeared completely after 7 days. But still I could not shave over neck since skin there was too soft. Wrinkles over neck were too prominent.
- After about 10 days of completion of therapy I felt ease in swallowing so besides milk, I could take butter milk, lassi

and drinks such as Ruh-af-za. I avoided icy drinks as they could affect my voice further.

- After 15 days I dared to take Rice and Daal with vegetable of potato and pea without spices. I could take milk and slices in breakfast. Thus started taking breakfast, lunch and dinner in good quantity. Still taste problem persisted as before so I could not enjoy any edible.
- By fortnight I could pick up 4 Kg weight and weakness became quite less. I started walking 5000 steps daily.
- Interestingly, I noticed that my scalp hair were denser so my baldness was reducing.

Thus most side effects are absent after 15 days of completion of my course of radio-therapy and chemo-therapy and I am finishing my article today. Two problems still persist- low volume and husky nature of voice and taste problem. I fail to report outcome of these problem in this article.