

Radiotherapy for head and neck cancer (short course)

Radiotherapy Department Patient information

What is radiotherapy?

Your doctor has recommended that you have radiotherapy. Radiotherapy is a treatment used to treat cancer and other diseases. It can be used alone or with chemotherapy, surgery, or hormone therapy.

Radiotherapy is the use of high energy rays, usually x-rays. It works by destroying cancer cells in the treated area. It can also cause some damage to normal cells in the treatment area. This is why radiotherapy can have side effects. Giving the treatment as a course of short daily treatments gives the normal cells a chance to recover.

The number of treatments you will receive depends on your needs. It will be decided by the consultant or registrar at your clinic appointment. This information leaflet is intended as a guide. If you have any questions about your treatment, please ask any of the team looking after you.

Planning your radiotherapy

Planning is a very important part of radiotherapy. It ensures it is targeted and causes the least damage to the surrounding healthy tissues.

You will have an appointment to make a mask, followed by a CT scan that will form part of the measurement process. You should allow up to two hours for the whole process. You will be asked to change into a gown and remove jewellery and piercings.

The mask will help to keep you still and in the same position for each treatment. This is important as there are sensitive structures that need to be avoided. Making the mask is simple and quick. It involves placing a warm plastic mesh around your whole head. This gently moulds to your shape. The process will be explained to you at the start of the appointment. Please discuss any worries you have with the radiographers.

For the CT scan you will be positioned wearing the mask as you will be every day for your treatment. Any marks that need to be made will be placed on the mask rather than on your skin.

After the appointment you will be given a date to start your radiotherapy. This will be a couple of weeks later as the planning process is complex. You will also be given a phone appointment for the new patient clinic. This will be booked for the working day before

your radiotherapy starts. This is a good chance for you to ask any questions you may have.

Treatment

You will be positioned on the couch in the same position you were in when your treatment was planned. This is done by lining up to the marks on the mask. You will need to lie very still but breathe normally. You will not feel anything during the radiotherapy - it is like having an x-ray taken.

The radiographers will need to leave the room while the radiation is on. They will be able to see you through a camera and hear you through the intercom. The treatment can be paused if needed. If you like, music can be played to help you relax.

The whole appointment will take about 15 minutes. Routine checks will be carried out on some days which may extend the time slightly.

It is important that you are not, or do not become, pregnant during treatment. Remember to use contraception if needed. If you have any concerns on this subject, please discuss them with your treatment team.

Skin care advice

During your radiotherapy and for a while afterwards, you are likely to experience skin changes in the area being treated. It may not be possible to stop a skin reaction, but by following this advice you should feel more comfortable. Please talk to your treatment team if you are experiencing problems and we will be able to give individual advice.

Reduce friction by:

- washing the skin gently in the treatment area with soap and water. Pat the skin dry, avoiding rubbing the area.
- wearing loose fitting, natural fibre clothing to reduce discomfort.
- avoiding shaving and waxing in the area.

Reduce irritation by:

- using a special moisturiser (Flamigel RT) in the treatment area. This will be given to you.
- avoiding antibiotic creams unless there is a known infection.
- avoiding sun exposure in the treatment area during radiotherapy. Use a factor 50 sun cream after radiotherapy has finished.
- avoiding extremes of temperature such as heating and cooling pads.

Other advice:

- You may swim if your skin isn't broken. Shower after swimming to wash off the chlorine and apply your moisturiser. Please stop swimming if it irritates your skin.
- Smoking is likely to make your skin reaction worse. If you need help to stop, please ask for advice.

Side effects

There are some side effects to radiotherapy. These tend to build up slowly towards the end of treatment. How bad the side effects are will vary from one person to another. They will last for about two weeks after treatment is finished. They will start to improve over the following months.

Please discuss any side effects you are experiencing with your treatment radiographers. They will give you the correct advice to manage your symptoms.

During your treatment course, you will have review appointments with your specialist nurse, dietician, speech and language therapist, or doctor. This is as well as your normal daily radiotherapy and will be shown on your appointment list. You will have the chance to discuss how your treatment is going and ask any questions you may have. The radiographers can arrange extra reviews for you if needed.

- **Pain in the mouth and/or throat:** This will usually start to happen after a couple of weeks of treatment. Smoking and drinking alcohol will make the side effects worse. You should try not to eat hot or spicy foods as they may irritate the lining of the throat. Your mouth and throat can become sore and inflamed and you may also develop mouth ulcers. You will be given painkillers or other medication to help you cope with these side effects. Your voice may also become hoarse. You may become sensitive to strong flavours and/or extreme heat and cold.
- **Dry mouth and loss of taste:** You may notice that you cannot produce enough saliva. Your mouth and throat may become dry. This will affect your taste and can also make speech difficult. You may notice a feeling of sticky mucus in the throat as the saliva can become thick and stringy. Frequent sips of water help, but we can also advise you on other products that can help.
- **Dental hygiene:** If you have a dry mouth it is very important to take special care of your teeth. They will be more prone to tooth decay. You should clean your teeth after meals and before bed. You may get bad breath. This can be helped by good mouth care and mouth washes.
- **Weight loss and loss of appetite:** It is important to try to maintain your weight even if you have a loss of appetite. Oral nutritional supplements are available if needed.
- **Skin soreness, itching, blistering, and colour changes in the treatment area:** It may feel dry, tight, or sore. Following the skin care advice above will help to keep it more comfortable. Patients that are also having chemotherapy may have a worse reaction and may need extra help and advice. Sometimes the skin can become weepy and break down. If this happens, you can be given prescription creams or dressings. You may experience redness in white skin tones and subtle darkness, yellow/purple/grey appearance in brown and black skin tones.
- **Tiredness:** This varies greatly between patients and can be due to many factors. Distance travelled, upset to your usual daily routine, general health, and depression/anxiety, as well as the effects of the radiotherapy on your body, can all play a part how tired you feel. Try 10 minutes of gentle exercise each day, e.g. a walk around the block, if you are able. Rest when you need it. There are some useful contacts at the end of this leaflet which may help you to cope.
- **Cough:** This may develop due to throat irritation. Sipping water may help with this.
- **Loss of hair:** this will only occur in the treated area.
- **Anxiety, low mood, feeling fed-up, or poor sleep:** Feeling anxious is a natural reaction to an uncertain situation, but if it affects how you cope with daily life, you may need help. If you feel your anxiety is getting worse, speak to your specialist nurse or GP who can offer information about you seeing a counsellor or psychologist. They can help you find ways of coping with it.

After your treatment course is finished, you will be given a follow-up appointment to see your consultant or registrar in six weeks. You will then be followed up regularly for some time.

Emotional support

It is normal to have feelings of anxiety, fear, or sadness during your treatment. The radiotherapy staff are there to support you and will always make time for you. If you're feeling down, it may help to talk with a friend or relative. Sometimes, it can help to talk with someone outside the family who has been through a similar experience.

The Cancer Care Map is a website you can search for lots of local support groups. You can put in your post code to show support groups in your area.

Complementary therapies

The department has a range of free complementary therapies on offer to all patients. They can help you cope with your treatment. If you would like further details, please speak to one of your radiographers, or you can call the complementary therapists directly on **0300 019 8268**.

Chapel

There is a Chapel within Poole Hospital which is open to people of all faiths. It is on level 1 of the hospital and is open 24 hours a day. If you would like to speak to a member of the chaplaincy team, you can call them directly on **0300 019 8153** or **0300 019 2167**.

Contact details

During treatment:

- If you need to contact the department during your course of radiotherapy, you will find telephone numbers for your treatment unit at the bottom of your appointment list.

Radiotherapy helpline:

- For radiotherapy related enquiries before or after treatment, there is the Dorset radiotherapy helpline (DORAH). This is an answerphone service which is checked by radiotherapy radiographers between 8am and 5.30pm, but a message can be left at any time. Please call **0300 019 2481**. Please note this helpline is not for emergencies.

Oncology patient hotline:

- For urgent enquiries, day or night, contact the oncology patient hotline on **0300 019 4302**. If your call is not answered, you will need to leave a message stating your name, hospital number, and contact telephone number. You should be phoned back within half an hour - in the unlikely event that you are not, please call again.

Head and neck clinical nurse specialist Tel: **0300 019 2071 / 2365**

Head and neck specialist radiographer Tel: **0300 019 2481**

Dietician Tel: **0300 019 2129**

Speech and language therapists Tel: **0300 019 8662**

For further general health-related information please visit or contact:

Macmillan Cancer Support

89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ

Tel: **0808 808 0000**

www.macmillan.org.uk

To read this leaflet in a different language,
please visit our website: www.uhd.nhs.uk/visit/patient-information-leaflets
and use the language and accessibility function available along the top of the site.

To ask for this leaflet in larger print, please contact the patient experience team on **0300 019 8499**
or email uhd.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net.

Poole Hospital, Longfleet Road, Poole, Dorset, BH15 2JB
Robert White Radiotherapy Centre, Dorset County Hospital
Williams Avenue, Dorchester, Dorset, DT1 2JY

Author: **Sandie Smalles** Date: **March 2026** Version: **Two** Review date: **March 2029** Ref: **025/24**

w: www.uhd.nhs.uk  @UHDTrust  @uhd_nhs

Some of our hospital services are moving.
Visit www.uhd.nhs.uk/future to find out more.