

Radiotherapy for head and neck cancer

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. The treatment is given as a course of short daily treatments. This 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 the radiotherapy 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 a 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. If you follow this advice, you should feel more comfortable. Please talk to your treatment team if you are having 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) on 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. Please ask for advice if you need help to stop.

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 depend on many factors. They will last for about two weeks after treatment is finished and then start to improve over the following months.

Please discuss any side effects you are experiencing with your treatment radiographers. They will be able to 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.

Expected - 50-100% (half to all) of people having radiotherapy

- **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. You may also get 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 will help. 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 should also follow the advice given by the dental hygienist and consultant in restorative dentistry. They will need to see you regularly as your mouth may be sensitive and easily irritated during your treatment. You may develop bad breath, but this can be helped by regular 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. If you are also having chemotherapy, you may have a worse reaction and may need extra help and advice. Sometimes the skin can become weepy and break down. If this occurs, 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 in 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 happen 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 could offer information about you seeing a counsellor or psychologist. They can help you find ways of coping with it.

Common - 10-50% (10-50 in 100) of people having radiotherapy

- **Nausea and vomiting:** Sickness is more likely to affect people who have chemotherapy and radiotherapy together. If it is a problem, your doctor can prescribe anti-sickness medicines (anti-emetics).
- **Swallowing:** Eating food may become difficult and swallowing may be painful. Choosing softer foods, or pureeing, may help you. You may need temporary placement of a feeding tube at the start of, or during, treatment to support nutrition and hydration. The dietician will review you to help with these issues.
- **Mouth infections:** If you have an infection, it can be treated with antibiotics or antifungal medicine.

Less common - less than 10% (10 in 100) of people having radiotherapy

- **Chest infection:** This may be due to food and/or secretions going down the windpipe.
- **Dehydration:** This can be due to eating and drinking less via the mouth.
- **Swelling of voice box**

- **Risk of hospital admission**
- **Lhermitte's sign:** Temporary changes to the spinal cord. This presents as a sudden electric shock like sensation on bending the neck. It may occur three to six months after treatment.

Longer term side effects

These can occur months to years after radiotherapy. The doctor who saw you for your first appointment should have discussed them with you.

Your radiotherapy is planned very carefully to avoid as much surrounding tissue as possible and minimise the risk of these side effects.

Expected - 50-100% (half to all) of people having radiotherapy

These may happen many months or years after radiotherapy and may be permanent. These side effects can include:

- **Skin colour change** in the treatment area. This can be lighter or darker for any skin tone.
- **Lymphoedema** - skin, chin, and soft-tissue swelling.
- **Dry mouth**
- **Altered taste or loss of taste** - with possibility of some recovery over 18 months.
- **Hair loss** in the treatment area or patchy re-growth.

Common - 10-50% (10-50 in 100) of people having radiotherapy

- **Permanent skin texture changes** in the treatment area - thicker or thinner skin.
- **Telangiectasia** in the treatment area - small visible blood vessels which look like spidery marks.
- **Dental problems**
- **Trismus** - jaw stiffness.
- **Voice changes**
- **Hypothyroidism** underactive thyroid gland, which may need you to take medication.

After completing your radiotherapy

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 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**

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

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or email uhd.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net.

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