

# Radiotherapy for lung cancer

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## Radiotherapy Department [Patient information](#)

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### 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 specific 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 receive an appointment for a radiotherapy planning CT scan. This will form part of the measurement process. The planning session can take up to an hour. For this scan you will be positioned in the way that you will be at each treatment. During this appointment pen marks are drawn onto the skin which will be used to plan your treatment accurately.

After this appointment you will be given a date to start your radiotherapy. This will usually be a couple of weeks later as the planning process is complex. You will also be given a telephone appointment for the new patient clinic. This will be booked for the working day before your radiotherapy starts. This is a good opportunity for you to ask any questions you may have. You are welcome to have a family member or friend with you for this telephone call.

## Treatment

You will be positioned on the couch in the same position you were in for your planning scan. This is done by using a red light which shines onto your body. Your chest area will need to be free of clothing so you can be positioned accurately. 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. Music can be played to help you relax if you would like it.

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. You should continue to use contraception if necessary. 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, your skin may change 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 having problems so you can be given advice.

Reduce friction by:

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

Reduce irritation by:

- using a moisturiser in the treatment area. One which does not contain sodium lauryl sulphate is better, such as E45. There is no need to wipe the moisturiser off before treatment.
- avoiding antibiotic creams unless there is a known infection.
- Avoiding sun exposure in the treatment area during radiotherapy. Use a high factor sun cream after finishing radiotherapy.
- 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.

## Short term side effects

There are some side effects to radiotherapy. These tend to build up slowly towards the end of treatment. How severe the side effects are will vary from one person to another and depends 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 team. They are there to help you and can give you advice when you need it.

During your treatment course you will also have a review appointment with your specialist nurse or doctor. This is alongside your normal daily radiotherapy and will be on your appointment list. You will have the chance to discuss how you are feeling and to 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**

- **Tiredness:** this varies between patients. Do as much as you feel able to and rest when you need to. Often light exercise such as a short walk can help.
- **Skin reaction:** your skin may become pinker or darker. It may feel dry, tight, or sore. Sometimes you can have a rash and it can feel itchy. Following the skin care advice above will help to keep you more comfortable.
- **Pain when swallowing:** try eating soft foods with plenty of sauce or gravy. Eat little and often rather than big meals. Avoid spicy foods, very hot foods, or strong alcohol. Smoking will make your side effects worse.
- **Loss of hair:** this will only occur in the treatment area.

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

- **Nausea:** ginger or peppermint can help. There is also medication to help with this.
- **Breathlessness or a cough:** this can be caused by lung inflammation. Steroids can be given to help. You may also make more spit.

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

- **Risk of infection.**
- **Lhermitte's sign:** an electric shock like sensation in your neck.

### **Rare - less than 1% (1 in 100) of people having radiotherapy**

- **Coughing up blood:** usually small amounts.

## Longer term side effects

These can occur months to years after radiotherapy. The doctor who sees you for your initial appointment should have discussed them with you. Only a small number of patients will develop any of these long-term side effects. For most people these side effects are mild and do not affect everyday life.

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**

- **Lung fibrosis:** scarring of the lung which normally does not cause a significant increase in breathlessness.

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

- **Shortness of breath and cough**
- **Long term irritation the oesophagus:** it can feel like food is sticking or making eating more uncomfortable. Eating softer foods can help.

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

- **Narrowing of the oesophagus.**
- **Damage to the heart.**
- **Bone fractures:** the bones can become more brittle in the area treated.

### **Rare - less than 1% (1 in 100) of people having radiotherapy**

- **Second malignancy:** radiotherapy is associated with a very small risk of developing a second cancer many years later. The benefits from the radiotherapy outweigh this very small risk.
- **Tingling or numbness of the arms.**
- **Lung infections.**
- **Hypothyroidism:** medication can be prescribed.
- **Hyposplenism:** the spleen is not working properly. You may need antibiotics.

After your treatment course is finished you will be given a follow up appointment to see your consultant or registrar in six - eight 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 your needs. If you're feeling low in mood, 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 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 one 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.

## Lung nurse specialists

Poole Hospital Tel: **0300 019 8338**

Royal Bournemouth Hospital Tel: **0300 019 4876**

Dorchester Hospital Tel: **01305 255289**

## 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](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

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Author: **Rebecca Morgan and Helen Payne** Date: **March 2026** Version: **Two** Review date: **March 2029** Ref: **039/24**

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