

Radiotherapy for oesophageal 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. Giving the treatment as a course of short daily treatments gives the normal cells a chance to recover.

The number of treatments that you will have 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. This 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 exactly as you will be every day for your treatment. During this appointment pen marks are drawn onto the skin. These will be used to plan your treatment accurately.

After this 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 telephone appointment for the new patient clinic. This will be booked for the working day before your radiotherapy starts. This will give you a chance to ask any questions you 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 using a red light which shines onto your body. Your chest area will need to be free of clothing. This is 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. Remember to use contraception if needed. If you have any concerns about this, 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. If you follow this advice, you should feel more comfortable. Please talk to your treatment team if you are having problems.

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 bad the side effects are will vary from one person to another. It depends on many factors. They will last for about two weeks after treatment is finished. They will then start to improve over the following months.

During your treatment you will 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. You can also ask any questions you may have. The radiographers can arrange extra reviews for you if needed.

Please discuss any side effects you have with your treatment team. They are there to help you.

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. Avoid spicy foods, very hot foods, or strong alcohol. Smoking will make your side effects worse.
- **Loss of appetite:** try eating little and often. Try to add calories to your meals with ingredients like butter or cream. You can be given supplements if needed.
- **Heartburn:** avoid spicy food. You can be given medication to help.
- **Nausea or vomiting:** ginger or peppermint can help. There is also medication you can be prescribed.
- **Stomach pain or bloating.**
- **Increased saliva.**

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

- **Loss of hair:** this will only occur in the treatment area.
- **Breathlessness or a cough:** you can be given steroids if needed.
- **Sore mouth or throat:** medication can be given to help with this.

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

- **Mouth ulcers:** keeping your mouth clean can help. You can be given specialist mouthwashes to use.
- **Change in your voice.**

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

- **Abnormal connection between oesophagus and airways.**
- **Pneumonia.**

Longer term side effects

These can occur months to years after radiotherapy. The doctor who sees you for your first appointment should have discussed them with you. Only a small number of patients will get 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 This will minimise the risk of these side effects.

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

- **Ongoing fatigue.**
- **Oesophageal stricture which may need treatment.**
- **Changes in swallowing.**
- **Scarring of the lungs:** normally does not cause a significant increase in breathlessness.

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

- **Hypothyroidism:** this may need medication.
- **Heart damage:** this risk depends on tumour position.
- **Skin changes:** including change in skin tone or telangiectasia. This is when small blood vessels look like spidery marks.

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

- **Second malignancy:** radiotherapy is linked to a very small risk of getting a second cancer many years later. The benefits from the radiotherapy outweigh this very small risk.
- **Oesophageal fistula:** abnormal connection between oesophagus and airways.
- **Long term need for feeding by a tube.**
- **Bleeding:** which may require treatment or surgery.
- **Myelitis:** swelling of the nerves which reduce muscle power.
- **Risk of rib fracture**
- **Hypothyroidism:** which may require treatment.

After your treatment course is completed, you will be given a follow up appointment to see your consultant or registrar. This will be in 6 - 8 weeks. You will 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. They will always make time for your needs. 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. You can also 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. It is open 24 hours a day. If you would like to speak to a member of the chaplaincy team, you can call them 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 contact the Dorset radiotherapy helpline (DORAH). This is an answerphone service. It is checked by radiotherapy radiographers between 8am and 5.30pm. 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. Please state 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.

Upper G.I. nurse specialists

Poole Hospital Tel: **0300 019 8739**

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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Author: **Rebecca Morgan and Helen Payne** Date: **March 2026** Version: **Two** Review date: **March 2029** Ref: **053/24**

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