

Radiotherapy for skin cancer

Radiotherapy Department Patient information

What is radiotherapy?

Your doctor has recommended you have radiotherapy. Radiotherapy is 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 the 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 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 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 possible damage to the surrounding healthy tissues.

You will have an appointment for radiotherapy planning. This appointment will take about 30 minutes. Your consultant will measure the area for treatment and mark your skin with a black pen. It will help if you can keep the marks on during your treatment course. However, do not worry if the marks become smudged or come off, as photographs and other records will be taken.

Sometimes a CT scan is needed for the measurement process. For this scan you will be positioned as you will be for your treatment. We may ask if we can make very small permanent marks (tattoos) on your skin. This is so we can position you for each visit.

After your planning appointment you will be given a date to start your radiotherapy. This can be the next day or a couple of weeks later. It will depend on the complexity of your plan. 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 chance to ask any questions that you may have.

Treatment

You will be positioned on the couch in the same position you were in when treatment was planned. 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 can see you via a camera and hear you through the intercom. The treatment can be paused if needed. The whole appointment will take about 15 - 30 minutes.

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 during treatment

During your radiotherapy and for a while afterwards, your skin will change in the area treated. It is not possible to stop a skin reaction. If you follow this advice, you should feel more comfortable. Please talk to your treatment team if you have any problems.

- Try to keep the area dry if possible. You can gently wash the area with warm water and pat the area dry.
- Do not wet shave the area - an electric razor may be used but it is better not to shave every day.
- If the skin is not weeping and feels dry, you can use a moisturiser in the treatment area. One which does not contain sodium lauryl sulphate is better, such as E45.
- Do not use make up in the area being treated.
- Keep the area protected from strong sunlight and wind. You can cover it or use a hat for shade. Do not use sun cream while you are having radiotherapy.
- Leave the area open to the air as much as possible.
- If the area is weeping, or you wish to cover it, a simple non-stick dressing may be used. Do not use adhesive plaster or sticky tape in the treatment area.
- Try to avoid clothes rubbing the area.
- Avoid extremes of temperature such as heating and cooling pads. If you are having treatment near the hairline, let your hair dry naturally. Do not use a hair dryer.
- Smoking can make your skin reaction worse. If you need help to stop please ask for advice.

Short term side effects

Please discuss any side effects that 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 redness:** It is normal for the skin to become pink or darker and tender towards the end of treatment. It can be like this for some time after. Gently clean the area with warm water and gently pat it dry. If the skin is not broken or weeping, a moisturiser can be applied twice a day.
- **Scabbing:** The scab may form and fall off many times before it heals. This can take 6 - 8 weeks after treatment to heal. It depends on the size and area treated.
- **Bleeding and/or weeping skin:** The treated area may break down. Your treatment team can provide advice and creams to help.
- **Hair thinning or loss:** This will only be in the treated area.

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

- **Soreness:** Your usual pain relief can help, such as paracetamol.

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

- **The area can become infected:** This can be treated by antibiotics.

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.

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

- **Permanent skin tone and texture changes:** You may have an area of skin that is a slightly different colour to before. It can also be thinner or thicker.
- **Permanent hair loss:** This will only be in the treated area.

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

- **Increased sensitivity to the sun:** A high factor sun cream is recommended once the skin has healed.
- **Telangiectasia:** Small blood vessels can look like spidery marks on the skin.

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

- **Ulcer:** This may need dressings or surgery.

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

- **Damage to the bones in the area treated.**
- **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.

Contact details

During treatment:

The phone numbers for your treatment unit are on the bottom of your appointment list. Use these numbers if you need to contact the department during your course of radiotherapy.

Dorset Radiotherapy Helpline (DORAH):

If you have radiotherapy related questions before or after your treatment, you can **call DORAH on 0300 019 2481**. This is an answerphone service. You can leave a message at any time. It is checked by radiotherapy radiographers between 8am and 5.30pm. **Please note this helpline is not for emergencies.**

Oncology patient hotline:

If you have an urgent question, call **0300 019 4302**. This hotline is open 24 hours, seven days a week. If your call is not answered, leave a message. Give your **name, hospital number and contact phone number**. You should be called back within 30 minutes. If you are not, please call again.

Skin nurse specialists

Poole Hospital Tel: **0300 019 8578**

Dorchester Hospital Tel: **01305 253252**

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

Macmillan Cancer Support, 89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ

Telephone: **0808 808 0000** **www.macmillan.org.uk**

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or email **uhd.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net**.

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