

Radiotherapy to the brain (short course)

Radiotherapy Department Patient information

What is radiotherapy?

Your doctor has recommended 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 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 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 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. This can take up to one hour.

The mask will help to keep you still and in the same position for the 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 clearly explained to you at the beginning of the appointment. Please discuss any anxieties you may have with the team.

For the CT scan you will be positioned wearing the mask. This will be the same every day for your treatment. Marks that need to be made will be placed on the mask and not on your skin.

After this appointment you will be given a date to start your radiotherapy. 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 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. 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 on this subject, please discuss them with your treatment team.

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.

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

During your treatment you will have a review appointment with your specialist nurse. 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.

- **Loss of hair:** this will only occur in the treated area.
- **Headaches or changes in eyesight:** it is important to let your treatment team know if this happens. They may need to change your medication.
- **Nausea or vomiting:** : it is important you speak to the radiographers if this occurs. They may need to change your medication.
- **Skin irritation:** (dry or tight skin, rash, or redness in the treated area). Use a mild or baby shampoo and try not to rub your scalp. Avoid using a hair dryer. A moisturiser, such as E45, can be soothing in areas where there is no hair. You may swim, but shower afterwards. Avoid sun exposure to your head. Wear a hat or keep in the shade.
- **Tiredness:** this varies between patients and can be due to many factors. Do as much as you feel able to and rest when you need to. Often light exercise such as a short walk can help.

Continue to take all the medicines you have been prescribed. It is very important not to stop taking any steroids suddenly. Your consultant or specialist nurse can advise you about this.

Longer term side effects

- **Somnolence syndrome:** this affects some patients about 4-6 weeks after the radiotherapy treatment has finished. The symptoms can include drowsiness, irritability, reduced concentration, and can contribute to feelings of depression.
- **Hair loss:** can sometimes be permanent or the regrowth is only partial. When the hair regrows, it can be a different colour or texture to before.

After your treatment you will be given a follow up appointment to see your consultant or registrar. This will be in 6 - 8 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. 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 www.cancercaremap.org. You can search this 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 call the complementary therapists directly on **0300 019 8268**.

Chapel

There is a chapel within Poole Hospital. This 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 call **0300 019 8153** or **0300 019 2167**.

Contact details

During treatment:

- The telephone numbers for your treatment unit are on the bottom of your appointment list.

Radiotherapy helpline:

- For radiotherapy related enquiries there is the Dorset oncology and radiotherapy advice helpline (DORAH). This is an answerphone service. It is checked by radiotherapy radiographers between 8am and 5.30pm, Monday to Friday. 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 **0300 019 4302**. If your call is not answered you will need to leave a message. This should 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.

Nurse specialists

You should have been given details of your specialist nurse. It might be helpful to add them to this leaflet. Please ask if you are not sure who your specialist nurse is.

Name: Contact number:

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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