

The Radiotherapy Department

The short course of radiotherapy

Information for patients



Introduction

You have been recommended a short course of radiotherapy by your consultant. The radiotherapy treatment is designed to control specific symptoms and problems which may be troubling you at present – reducing the need for medications and enabling you to do the activities you need and want to do. This is called **palliative radiotherapy**.

This leaflet will highlight the key points of the discussions you will have had with your doctor and treatment team. Family members and friends may also find it helpful.

Radiotherapy is radiation treatment and is given by machines called **Linear Accelerators**. The treatment is tailor made to suit your needs.

How does it work?

Radiotherapy causes changes in cells (normal and cancer cells). Cancer cells are more sensitive to radiotherapy than normal cells and so more of them are killed. The normal cells are better able to repair themselves and so the damage to normal cells is mainly temporary. This is the reason why radiotherapy has some side effects.

How often is it given?

Radiotherapy is usually given as outpatient appointments (sometimes known as fractions). Treatment can be just once or a series of appointments. **It is very important to complete your treatment and attend for each appointment, please let the department know if you feel unable to attend.**

General advice for during treatment

It is advisable that you take any pain medication that you are prescribed prior to your radiotherapy appointments as you may find lying on the bed uncomfortable. Please bring any medication that you may need during the day with you.

Before treatment

When you have radiotherapy treatment it will first need to be planned carefully. This will often be done using a CT scanner (or simulator) which uses x rays to gain information about the area to be treated.

The staff will ask you to lie on a fairly hard couch (which some people may find uncomfortable). You have to lie very still in the correct position required for your radiotherapy so that the measurements are accurate and the radiographer can record the correct position for your treatment.

During your **CT scan** the couch moves in and out of the 'polo hole' shaped part of the machine for a few minutes. Nothing will touch or hurt you, and you will not feel anything. Planning normally takes from between 15 to 45 minutes. For the planning appointment you can still eat and drink as normal.

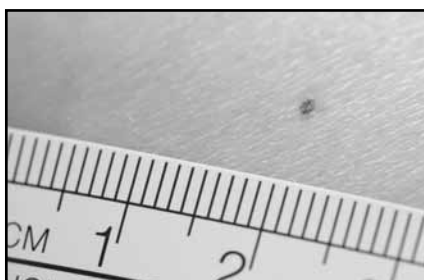
The planning CT scanner



Skin markings/ tattoos

The radiographers will draw on your skin with a **felt pen**. As the pen marks drawn on your skin will wash away, you will be given **small tattoos**. These tattoos are the size of small dots and they are permanent. They are used to place you in the correct position for treatment everyday. After the initial planning and measurement, various calculations have to be made. The staff will give you a list of your appointment/s for treatment.

A tattoo



Treatment

You will lie on a couch in the same position as you were for the planning. The radiographers will move the couch and the treatment machine into position. The treatment machine may come close to you but it will not touch you.

When you are in the correct position the radiographers will leave the room to start your treatment. The machine makes a buzzing noise when it is switched on, but you will not see or feel anything. You have to lie still and breathe normally. The radiographers will be watching you on cameras from outside. If you want them to come back in just raise your hand.

The treatment machine



Side effects

Radiotherapy treatment is painless. However, there are some side effects which are associated with radiotherapy. **They will depend upon the area of the body being treated.** If it is thought that you will experience any symptoms, the doctor will have discussed these with you before treatment starts. You may notice one or more of the following.

Ask your radiographer, doctor or nurse practitioner to tick which of the side effects below may be related to you

Skin reaction

Skin in the treatment area may become red, itchy and/or sore. The amount of reaction depends on the area being treated and the individual's skin. **Some people have no skin problems at all.**

Ask the radiographer to explain the area of skin that may be affected. The skin care information sheet will tell you how to care for your skin to reduce the reaction and discomfort .

Hair loss

This happens only in the area treated – for example, chest hair if your chest is being treated. The hair may grow back in time but it may be patchy. Ask your radiographer or oncology doctor to show you exactly where your hair may fall out.

Tiredness

Radiotherapy may make you feel tired. Listen to your body and if necessary allow yourself extra time to rest or sleep. The tiredness wears off over a few weeks once the treatment ends.

Bowels

Treatment to the lower back or pelvis may temporarily affect your bowels causing some diarrhoea. Increase the amount you drink during this time and consider changing your diet to avoid roughage until the diarrhoea goes away. Your treatment team or your family doctor will be able to give you further advice if it continues.

Bladder

Treatment to the lower back or pelvis may temporarily irritate your bladder, increasing your need to pass urine more frequently. It may also become slightly uncomfortable, possibly with a little stinging. Increase the amount you drink during this time. Some people find a glass of cranberry juice helps to settle the discomfort but do not use if you are taking anti coagulants.

Nausea (feeling sick)

If we think this is likely then we will give you anti-sickness tablets to take before treatment. It is important to continue to eat and drink, try eating small meals more frequently. If nausea persists or you are vomiting (being sick) despite taking anti-sickness medication then tell your treatment team or contact your family doctor.

Breathing

If you are having treatment to your chest you may experience shortness of breath, cough (including bringing up sputum and/or blood) or they may temporarily increase. Benefits from the treatment could appear up to four weeks after completion and can be long lasting. Continue taking any medications that you have been given. Contact your family doctor if the symptoms persist.

Flu like symptoms

Some people, having treatment to their chest, may experience 'flu' like symptoms in the first 24 hours after treatment. A simple pain killer, like Paracetamol, and rest may help to relieve this. If this continues contact your treatment team or your family doctor who will be able to give you further advice.

Sore throat and swallowing

Treatment to the upper chest may cause a sore throat and/or difficulty swallowing. Avoid hot or cold drinks. You might find it easier to swallow soft foods, adding gravy/sauce/custard to meals. Simple pain medication and ant-acids may help. Always take the medication regularly and time before eating and drinking.

Pain

If radiotherapy is given for pain relief, the pain can worsen immediately after the treatment due to inflammation in the treatment area. This is quite normal. Your treatment team will be able to advise you about changes to your pain medication during this time.

The pain may or may not get better straight away but the treatment is usually of benefit within weeks – this is different for each individual. Continue with your pain medication until it starts to ease. Your family doctor will be able to advise you about changes to your pain medication as this improves.

Avoid using a hot water bottle, heat pad, electric blanket or cold pack in the treatment area to ease the pain as this can cause the skin reaction to become worse.

After your radiotherapy

Any further follow up with your consultant or family doctor will be explained to you before you finish your treatment.

How to contact us

If you have any queries during your radiotherapy or about your symptoms during treatment please do not hesitate to ask a member of your treatment team or contact the radiotherapy reception on **01865 235465** during normal working hours.

Alternatively you can contact the Oxford triage assessment team on **01865 572192** out of hours.

Following treatment you can contact your site specific nurse practitioner, Macmillan nurse or family doctor for further advice and support.

If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221473** or email **PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk**

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