

Patient information factsheet

Radiotherapy for cancer of the vulva

Your doctors have recommended you have radiotherapy treatment. Radiotherapy involves the use of high-energy radiation and is commonly used to treat cancer - almost half of people with cancer have radiotherapy as part of their treatment plan.

This factsheet explains what to expect at your radiotherapy treatment appointments. It aims to answer some of the initial questions you are likely to have but if you would like more information or have any concerns please speak to a radiographer who will be pleased to advise you.

Your planning appointment

Before your treatment begins you will need to attend an appointment to allow your consultant, along with your radiographers and physicists (who are responsible for calculating the dose of radiotherapy required) to plan your treatment to ensure it's accurate.

When you arrive for your planning appointment you will be asked change into a hospital gown and remove your clothing on the lower half of your body.

We will ask you to lie on a large beanbag couch and raise your knees. Your feet will be supported and positioned as far apart as is comfortable and the beanbag will be moulded around your legs and feet to support you in a comfortable position. The treatment couch will move closer to the radiotherapy machine, but the machine will not be close enough to touch you.

Your consultant will then place some pen marks on your skin. The radiographers will take a tracing of the marks for use during your treatment. You may also be given some permanent skin marks called 'tattoos'. With your consent, a photograph will be taken which will be used to help ensure your treatment is accurate.

Please note there will be several members of your healthcare team present at this appointment. Your radiographer will explain your treatment appointments and answer any questions you may have before you go home.

What to expect when you come for treatment

You will attend the radiotherapy department, Level A, Southampton General Hospital as an outpatient.

When you arrive, check in using your barcode letter and take a seat in the waiting area.

We will ask you to change into a hospital gown before you go into the treatment room.

When you are called into the treatment room

Once you enter the treatment room you will be asked to confirm your **name, date of birth** and **address**. This will be repeated each time you attend.

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You will be positioned for your treatment as you were during the planning session. After taking time to position you carefully, the radiographers will use the tracing from your planning session to re-apply some pen marks to identify where treatment will be applied. It's important that you remain still so that we can deliver your treatment accurately.

Radiotherapy treatment is painless and each session usually lasts for 10 to 15 minutes. Your radiographers will be able to answer any questions you may have about what to expect.

Alongside your treatment, you may be required to have blood tests or see the doctor and/or a specialist radiographer on a regular basis. If this is the case we will tell you, but please check with a radiographer before leaving the department.

Once your radiotherapy treatment is complete you are free to leave and continue the day as normal.

Appointment schedule

On the first day of your treatment you will be given a list of appointments. Please note that these are **subject to change**. If we need to change any of your appointments we will let you know.

Side effects

Radiotherapy can cause side effects, during and after your course of treatment.

Your radiographers will ask you how you are feeling every day. Feel free to discuss any treatment-related changes or concerns about side effects with them.

Everyone reacts to radiotherapy differently, but you may begin to notice some or all of the side effects outlined below during your second or third week of treatment.

Effects on the skin

Over time, the skin over the area that's being treated may become red and itchy. The following advice will help to minimise skin reactions:

- Treat the area gently
- Avoid vigorous rubbing and instead pat skin dry with a soft towel
- Avoid very hot or very cold water when you wash
- Use your normal washing products – don't suddenly change brands or use a new product while you are having radiotherapy
- Moisturise sparingly with a moisturiser that you have used previously (but not a zinc-based barrier cream such as Sudocrem)
- Wear loose fitting clothes made from natural fibres that will not irritate your skin
- Avoid exposing the area to the sun or cold wind
- Avoid soaking in a bath for long periods of time

Dissolving 1tsp of table salt in a pint of warm water and using it to bathe the area being treated can be soothing and help avoid infection.

Nausea/loss of appetite

You may feel nauseous or sick and lose your appetite. If these symptoms occur, speak to your radiotherapy team or nurse specialist team for advice and support.

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During your treatment it's important to maintain your strength by continuing to eat and drink. Try to drink up to two litres of fluid a day. Fluids can include water, squash, decaffeinated tea or coffee and fruit juice. (However, if you are on warfarin you should not drink cranberry juice).

Effects on your bowels and back passage

Your bowel habits may change. You may find that your stools become looser and more frequent or you occasionally become constipated.

Your back passage (rectum) may become sore and irritated and you may notice blood on wiping. If you use haemorrhoid products, tell the radiographers as they may have to recommend an alternative.

Urinary effects

The frequency, urgency and flow of your urine may alter as the treatment progresses.

- You may experience a stinging or burning sensation similar to cystitis when you urinate. If this happens, let your radiographer know. You may be asked to provide a urine sample so that we can check for infection.
- Occasionally you may pass urine which appears cloudy or has blood in it. This is normal.
- As your treatment progresses, you may find you are urinating more at night.

Tiredness (fatigue)

As your treatment progresses you may become more tired. Try to take a little light exercise and drink plenty of fluids to reduce your fatigue.

Vaginal effects

You may notice some soreness inside and around the outside of the vagina. It's fine to have sex during treatment as long as it isn't painful.

Some women also experience narrowing of the vagina (vaginal stenosis). This is a medium to long-term side effect which can affect sexual activity and make vaginal examinations more difficult. To help prevent this, we may give you vaginal dilators to use regularly for 18 months after your treatment has finished. Dilators are small plastic tubes which can be inserted to keep the vagina open and prevent the formation of scar tissue. You will have the opportunity to discuss these along with any other issues regarding sexual function with a specialist radiographer or nurse.

Hair loss

Pelvic radiotherapy may make your pubic hair (hair around your genital area) fall out. It should start to grow back again within a few weeks after radiotherapy finishes, but it may be thinner. Occasionally, hair loss can be permanent.

Premature menopause

Pelvic radiotherapy can cause some women to have a premature (early) menopause. Your doctor or specialist nurse will talk to you about this and tell you if you need to consider hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

If you notice any changes or side effects during your treatment, please discuss them with the radiographers. They will be able to offer advice or reassurance and suggest ways to help you cope.

After radiotherapy

Side effects from your treatment will be at their worst around two weeks after your final radiotherapy session. They should then gradually settle over the next couple of months. Continue to follow the advice you have been given during your treatment. If you have made any dietary changes you can gradually reverse them. You'll have a follow-up appointment with your doctor approximately six to eight weeks after you have finished your treatment.

Frequently asked questions

- **Will I be radioactive?** You will not be radioactive and it's perfectly safe for you to be around family and friends.
- **Can I swim?** While we would normally encourage physical exercise, swimming in chlorinated water can dry your skin out further and could cause a worse skin reaction.
- **After treatment, can I continue with my normal activities?** Yes you can, within reason. If you start to feel really tired or unwell you may have to make adjustments.
- **Do I feel anything as the treatment is happening?** No, you don't feel a thing. It is quick and painless.
- **Can I miss treatments?** We would advise that you do not miss a treatment once you have started. You might find that there are gaps in your appointment schedule, which may be due to machine services or public holidays. We work hard to minimise these gaps and you may on occasion be asked to attend on a weekend or public holiday.

Useful information

Parking

Car park 8 is situated outside the oncology centre. This can be found by following directions for the eye unit. Parking spaces are limited, so please allow plenty of time to park.

Patients having radiotherapy treatment are entitled to a discount on parking. Remember to validate your ticket at the radiotherapy reception before paying at the parking machine.

Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centre

The centre is located on B level in the East Wing courtyard. Opening hours are Monday to Friday, from 10am to 4pm. Drop-in sessions are available or you can book an appointment on telephone: **023 8120 6037**.

Who to contact if you have concerns

You can contact the Macmillan gynaecological oncology clinical nurse specialists on telephone: **023 8120 8765** or email: gynaecologysupport@uhs.nhs.uk.

If you have urgent symptoms relating to your current radiotherapy treatment, please call the acute oncology service at Southampton General Hospital on **07867 973649**. This number is answered 24-hours, seven days a week, but is only for treatment-related symptoms and not for general queries such as rearranging appointments or hospital transport, for example.

If your symptoms are not urgent, you can speak to one of the radiographers when you attend for your radiotherapy treatment.

In an emergency call 999.

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Useful links

Cancer Research UK – Radiotherapy for cervical cancer:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cervical-cancer

Cancer Research UK – Radiotherapy for endometrial and uterine cancer:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/womb-cancer

Cancer Research UK – Radiotherapy for vulval cancer:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/vulval-cancer

Macmillan – Pelvis radiotherapy explained:

www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/vulva-cancer/treating/radiotherapy/pelvic-radiotherapy-explained

NHS Choices – Radiotherapy: side effects:

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Radiotherapy/Pages/Side-effects.aspx

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.