

Patient information factsheet

Radiotherapy to the head and neck

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 CT (computerised tomography) scan

Before you have your radiotherapy treatment, you will be asked to come in for two appointments:

- Your first appointment will be in the mould room. We will make you a plastic mask to hold your head and neck in exactly the same position for each of your radiotherapy treatments. The mask is designed so that you can breathe normally while wearing it.
- At your second appointment you will have a CT scan while wearing the new mask. We'll use the images from this scan to plan exactly where you will be treated with radiotherapy.

The mask and CT scan process will take a couple of hours. You will also be given a letter containing your appointment barcode which you will need to bring with you when you come into hospital for your treatment.

Your radiotherapy treatment

When you get to the radiotherapy department, check in using your barcode letter and take a seat in the waiting area. A radiographer will give you a hospital gown to change into before you go into the treatment room.

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

The radiographer will carefully put you into the right position for treatment, using the reference marks on your mask from the CT scan. These marks enable us to deliver your treatment accurately, so it's important that you stay still.

The treatment takes about 15 to 20 minutes. For some of this time you will be on your own in the room, but the radiographers will be watching you all the time using a discreet closed circuit television system. If you need assistance, you can raise your hand and the radiographers will come back into the room.

Your appointment schedule

You will be given a list of your upcoming appointments on your first day of treatment, but please be aware that they are **subject to change**. We will let you know if we need to change one of your appointments.

When your treatment is complete, ask the radiographer if you are needed for any other appointments within the department. If not, you are free to leave and continue your day.

Side effects

You may begin to notice some side effects during your second or third week of radiotherapy. It's important to remember that treatment reactions are very individual and the severity will differ from person to person. You will be seen weekly by the doctor, dietitian and head and neck specialist radiographer to review how you are managing and ensure you have plenty of support to help you complete the course of treatment.

You may experience some or all of the side effects below.

Effects on the skin

Over time, the skin over the area that's being treated with radiotherapy 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 product that you have used previously or a gentle, non-scented preparation
- Wear loose fitting clothes made from natural fibres that will not irritate your skin
- Avoid exposing the area to the sun or cold wind
- Use an electric shaver rather than wet shaving

Effects on your mouth and throat

Radiotherapy will make the lining of your throat and mouth sore as the treatment progresses. You can take paracetamol if your throat is sore, but do not exceed the recommended dose. If your mouth becomes very sore you can try gargling with soluble aspirin, but make sure you spit it out after gargling. You can take both aspirin and paracetamol together. It's important to tell the radiographers if your mouth is still sore after this, as you may require a prescription for stronger painkillers.

If your throat is being treated you might experience hoarseness or loss of voice. If this occurs please try to rest your voice and avoid smoky atmospheres.

You might experience a dry mouth or find you have thick mucus, especially first thing in the morning. Sipping fluids regularly helps reduce the dry feeling. Some people also find it helpful to use a room humidifier in their home to make the atmosphere less dry.

While you are having your radiotherapy it's important to take care of your mouth:

- Keep your mouth clean by rinsing regularly with a saline solution. To make the solution, dissolve one teaspoon of salt in a pint of water. Rinse every four hours during the day, increasing to hourly if the mouth gets very sore.
- Avoid any mouthwashes unless we have prescribed them.
- Use plain Vaseline (not coloured, perfumed or flavoured) to prevent your lips drying. Avoid Vaseline on broken skin.
- Brush your teeth (and dentures) with a small, soft toothbrush after each meal with fluoride toothpaste.
- Leave your dentures out if they become uncomfortable. Please check with the radiographers whether you should have your dentures in or out during the treatment.
- Avoid smoking and drinking spirits as these increase radiotherapy reactions.

Tell your radiographer if you find that you cough during eating and drinking, or that food gets stuck, as you may need to be referred to a specialist for swallowing advice

Weight loss

Radiotherapy to your mouth and throat will affect your sense of taste whilst you are having treatment and for some weeks afterwards. Some people lose their sense of taste completely during this time, while others find that everything tastes the same.

A lack of taste and difficulty chewing or swallowing will affect your appetite. It's important that you maintain your weight throughout treatment because:

- if you lose weight the mask doesn't fit as well and the accuracy of treatment is reduced
- also, it's important that your body is getting the nutrition it needs to provide the energy to help with your recovery.

In order to be well-nourished during and after treatment, it's important that you:

- drink plenty of fluids - more than two litres per day
- eat little and often if you can't manage meals
- eat soft, moist foods (for example soup or custard)
- avoid spicy, sour, acidic or salty foods when your mouth is sore as they may be uncomfortable to eat
- weigh yourself weekly

If eating becomes difficult you may be prescribed high-calorie drinks to supplement your diet. To avoid significant weight loss we may need to give you a feeding tube before or during your treatment. This will involve a short stay on either the day case or inpatient ward. We'll discuss the choice of tube with you at the beginning of your treatment pathway and you will have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. If you do require a feeding tube, you (and your carers) will be taught how to manage it.

You will have a weekly appointment with a dietitian who will advise you on how to avoid weight loss during treatment and how to use the feeding tube if required.

Weight Chart

Week 1 Week 2
Week 3 Week 4
Week 5 Week 6

Tiredness (fatigue)

As the treatment progresses you may become more tired and may need to rest more than usual. It's still a good idea to do some gentle activity, such as a short walk each day, if you feel able to.

Please discuss any changes that you notice with your radiographer. They will be able to offer advice or reassurance and suggest ways to help you cope with treatment side effects. They can also call the head and neck specialist radiographer to come and see you during treatment at any point.

Frequently asked questions

- **Will I be radioactive?** You will not be radioactive; 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.

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- **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

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**.

You can also use the following telephone numbers to contact a member of staff directly:

Head and neck specialist radiographer: **023 8077 7222**, bleep: **2865**

Head and neck nurse specialist: **023 8120 5816**

Dietitian: **023 8120 6072**

Useful links

Cancer Research UK – About head and neck cancer:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/head-and-neck-cancer

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.**