

Patient information factsheet

Radiotherapy to the oesophagus

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.

What to expect at your radiotherapy appointment

When you get to the radiotherapy department, check in using your barcode letter and take a seat in the waiting area.

The radiographer may ask you to change into a hospital gown 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 happen 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 your CT planning scan. These marks enable us to deliver your treatment accurately, so it's important that you stay still.

As well as your radiotherapy treatment, you may need to have blood tests or see a dietitian and/or doctor so please check with a radiographer before leaving the department after treatment.

Your 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

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 may experience some of the side effects outlined below or none at all:

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

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- 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
- wear loose fitting clothes made from natural fibres that will not irritate
- avoid exposing the area to the sun or cold wind

Oesophagitis

Your oesophagus (gullet) may become inflamed and sore after having radiotherapy treatment. You may feel as if you have a "lump" in your throat or a burning sensation in your chest.

You may also find swallowing uncomfortable.

You can help to reduce discomfort when you eat by:

- eating slowly and cutting your food into smaller pieces
- eating smaller meals more frequently instead of three larger meals
- eating softer foods that are easier to swallow
- avoiding crunchy foods that are more difficult to swallow
- increasing your intake of fluid and drinking through a straw to make swallowing easier
- avoiding hot and spicy foods
- avoiding alcohol and tobacco

If you continue to experience discomfort, you may be prescribed medication in order to make swallowing much easier. You will be weighed weekly to make sure you are not losing weight and a dietitian will see you regularly throughout your course of treatment.

Coughing and breathlessness

Radiotherapy may cause you to feel breathless. It can also aggravate any cough that you may already have and even cause you to cough up blood or phlegm. You can speak to your radiographer about this if you have any questions.

Nausea

You may feel sick and lose your appetite. Try to eat little and often if you can't manage large proper meals. Ginger products such as ginger beer or biscuits are often useful in reducing the feeling of sickness. Alternatively, a doctor can prescribe some anti-sickness medication.

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.

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.

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.

If you are having radiotherapy treatment you are entitled to a discount on parking. You must remember to validate your ticket at the radiotherapy reception before paying at the parking machine.

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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**.

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.
- **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.

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**.

Useful links

NHS Choices – Radiotherapy: side effects:

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

Cancer Research UK – Radiotherapy for oesophageal cancer:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/oesophageal-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy

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.