

Patient information factsheet

Colorectal radiotherapy

Your doctors have recommended you have radiotherapy treatment for bowel cancer (depending on where the cancer starts, bowel cancer is sometimes called colon or colorectal cancer).

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 when you come for treatment

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

You will need to have a full bladder for your treatment. When you arrive you will be asked to drink enough fluids to ensure your bladder is appropriately full in time for your appointment.

How much will I need to drink?

It's important for the accuracy of your treatment that your bladder is as comfortably full as when you came for your CT planning scan. We will give you a specific quantity of fluid and a set amount of time in which to drink it, based on the information recorded at your planning scan. Please ensure you arrive with enough time before your appointment for this to take place. A radiographer will come and tell you when to start drinking.

If at any time you feel that you are struggling to hold your bladder or you are not comfortably full, please tell the one of the radiographers before they take you into the treatment room.

Changing into a gown

In order to minimise any potential delays, we will ask you to change into a hospital gown before going into the treatment room. Changing facilities are available on every treatment machine.

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 for treatment.

You will be positioned for treatment as you were during your CT planning scan. The radiographers will take time to position you carefully, using the reference marks applied at your CT planning appointment. It's important that you remain still so that we can deliver your treatment accurately.

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

Patient information factsheet

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

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

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.

Your first five appointments

At your first five treatment appointments you will have a series of images taken before your treatment is delivered. This enables us to check your position and the fullness of your bladder. If your bladder is not sufficiently full, the radiographers will advise on what is required to allow your treatment to go ahead successfully. This may involve drinking more fluid or waiting longer for your bladder to fill.

Side effects

Radiotherapy can cause side effects. Treatment reactions and the severity of side effects will differ from person to person. They are usually noticeable after the second or third week of treatment and can continue for a while after treatment has finished. You may experience some of the side effects outlined below, or none at all.

The radiographers will ask you daily how you are feeling. Feel free to discuss any treatment related changes or concerns about side effects with them.

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 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

Effects on your bowels and back passage

Your bowel habits may change. They may become looser, more frequent or occasionally constipated. Your back passage (rectum) may become sore and irritated and you may notice some blood on wiping. If you use haemorrhoid products tell your radiographers, they may need to recommend an alternative.

Urinary effects

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

- You may experience a stinging or burning sensation when you urinate (similar to cystitis). We will ask you to do a urine sample to rule out an infection.
- Occasionally you may pass urine which appears cloudy or has blood in it, but this is quite normal.
- You may need to urinate more frequently during the night as the treatment progresses.

Patient information factsheet

Tiredness (fatigue)

It's common to experience increased tiredness towards the end of treatment. We will encourage you to drink plenty of fluids, take part in light activity and exercise to help with this.

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

Recovery after treatment varies from person to person. Treatment side effects will peak two weeks after your last radiotherapy treatment, and most side effects will then gradually settle over a 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.

Follow-up appointment

An appointment with your consultant will be arranged for approximately six to eight weeks after you have finished treatment.

Frequently asked questions

- **Will I be radioactive?** You will not be radioactive and are safe to be around family and friends.
- **Can I swim?** We would normally encourage physical exercise however swimming in chlorinated water can dry your skin out further. This may increase the likelihood of a skin reaction.
- **After treatment, can I continue with my normal activities?** Yes you can within reason. If you 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, however you may find gaps in your appointment schedule due to machine services or public holidays. The radiographers will 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 - follow 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 offers a range of services to support you and you family and carers. It is located on B level in the East Wing Courtyard at Southampton General Hospital. Opening hours are Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm. Drop-in sessions are available or you can book an appointment by calling **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.

Patient information factsheet

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

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/colon-and-rectal-colorectal

NHS Choices – Radiotherapy: side effects

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

Cancer Research UK

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/bowel-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy/radiotherapy-for-rectal-cancer

Contact the Cancer Research UK nurses on freephone **0808 800 4040** (Open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday).

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.