

Patient information factsheet

Radiotherapy treatment

Your doctors have recommended you have radiotherapy treatment for 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.

Please eat and drink as usual before your treatment.

Changing into a gown

You will need to change into a hospital gown for your treatment. In order to minimise potential delays, we may ask you to change before going into the treatment room.

When you are called into the treatment room

When 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.

The radiographers will take time to position you for your treatment carefully, using the reference marks applied at your CT planning scan. 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.

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 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 which you may begin to notice during your treatment or sometimes after the course is complete.

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It's important to remember that treatment reactions are very individual and because everyone is different, the severity of any side effects varies from person to person.

You may experience some of the side effects outlined below, but please bear in mind that side effects will depend on the area being treated.

Feel free to discuss any changes or concerns about side effects with your radiographers.

Effects on the skin

Over time, the skin in the area of treatment may become red and itchy. To minimise any reaction you should:

- 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 treated area to the sun or cold wind

Tiredness (fatigue)

As the treatment progresses you may become more tired. We would encourage you to take a little light exercise and to drink plenty of fluids to help reduce this.

Diarrhoea

If you are having treatment to the pelvis, you may notice a change in your bowel habits and they may become more loose than normal. This can be controlled by following a low fibre diet. For more information about this please speak to a radiographer.

Nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting

This can occur if the treatment area is around your upper abdomen, but can be controlled using medicines called anti-emetics. These can be prescribed by your GP or hospital doctor.

Coughing, breathlessness and soreness when swallowing

Radiotherapy treatment to the chest area can result in a cough and you may cough up blood or phlegm.

If you usually experience breathlessness, this may be aggravated by radiotherapy. It's also common to experience soreness when you swallow. This can be made easier by eating a softer diet. Your doctor may also be able to prescribe medicines to help.

Headaches and hair loss

An increase in headaches is not unusual if you are having treatment to your head. You can take your usual pain relief medicine to control this, but if your headaches are persistent and you are concerned please discuss it with a radiographer.

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Hair loss during radiotherapy is not uncommon. It is slow and gradual so may not occur until after your course of treatment is complete.

Always discuss any symptoms that are worrying you with your radiographers or doctor as there might be something that can be done to help.

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. 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 - 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

This 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.

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

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.**