

Patient information factsheet

Whole cranio-spinal radiotherapy

We have given you this factsheet because your doctors have recommended you have radiotherapy treatment. Radiotherapy involves the use of high-energy radiation and is commonly used to treat cancer. This factsheet explains what to expect at your radiotherapy treatment appointments. It aims to answer some of the initial questions you may have. If you would like more information or have any concerns, please speak to a radiographer.

What is cranio-spinal radiotherapy?

Cranio-spinal radiotherapy is treatment of the whole brain and spine with radiotherapy. This is sometimes followed by an additional 'boost' of treatment to the primary site in the brain or spine. Cranio-spinal radiotherapy can also be referred to as whole central nervous system (CNS) radiotherapy.

Before your cranio-spinal radiotherapy

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

- Mould room
- CT planning scan

These two appointments usually happen on the same day. You should allow approximately two hours in the department for these processes to be completed.

Mould room

Your first visit to the mould room will involve having a plastic mould (also called a mask or immobilisation shell) made of your head and shoulders. The mask has three purposes:

- to keep your head and neck still during treatment.
- to ensure you are in the same position for each treatment
- to minimise the number of treatment marks on your skin

The mask is made from a sheet of thermo-plastic which is hard when dry and softens when placed in warm water. This is placed over your head and neck and moulded to your shape, until it begins to dry and harden. You will be able to breathe completely normally while wearing the mask.

CT planning

Once the mask is made you will have a CT planning scan wearing it.

We will use the images from this CT scan to plan exactly where on your body you will be treated with radiotherapy.

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The radiographers will position you on the couch wearing your mask. The scan will take about five minutes, during which time you will be able to breathe normally. The radiographers will then make some tiny tattoo dots on your pelvis. These provide the set-up co-ordinates that are used to ensure accuracy at each treatment session.

After the planning scan is completed, you will be able to leave the hospital.

Your radiotherapy treatment

When you arrive at the radiotherapy department, check in at reception 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.

Once you enter the treatment room, we will ask you to confirm your name, date of birth and address. This will be repeated each time you attend for treatment. Radiotherapy treatment takes place daily, Monday to Friday. Your radiotherapy doctor will have already told you how many treatments you will be having.

Your treatment will be performed on a machine called a linear accelerator. The treatment radiographers will explain the procedure to you and answer any questions you may have. We will carefully place you into the right position, using the reference marks on your mask and pelvis from the CT scan. We will then move the treatment machine and couch into position. The machine will move around you but will not touch you. You will not feel anything and you do not have to hold your breath. However, it is important that you stay still.

The treatment takes about 30 minutes. Most of this time is spent getting you in the right position and taking images to ensure accuracy. The treatment delivery from each angle only takes a few 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.

Once a week you may need to have a blood test. This usually takes place in the radiotherapy department. Your radiographers will let you know when this will be.

Side effects

Tiredness (fatigue)

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

Effects on the skin

Over time, the skin in the area of treatment may become red and itchy. You should:

- treat the area gently and avoid vigorous rubbing
- avoid very hot or very cold water while washing
- use your normal washing products (do not change brands or use a new product while you are having radiotherapy)
- use a mild shampoo to wash your hair
- avoid using a hairdryer (pat hair dry with a soft towel instead)
- avoid applying any extra products
- wear a scarf or hat to protect the skin as it will be more sensitive to weather conditions such as sun and wind

Hair loss

Hair loss varies from person to person and will depend on the treatment you are having. Hair loss is gradual and usually starts two to three weeks into treatment but may continue after you finish.

Symptoms will range from thinning of the hair to complete hair loss in the treatment area. For some people this may be permanent. Your doctor or radiographer will be able to discuss this with you.

The radiographer can arrange an appointment in the Macmillan Centre for a wig fitting at your request.

Nausea (feeling sick)

Nausea is a common side effect of cranial-spinal radiotherapy. Your doctor will prescribe some anti-sickness medication for you to take 30 to 45 minutes before each treatment.

If you find you lose your appetite, try to eat little and often rather than large meals.

Headache

Some people find they have more headaches than usual at the beginning of their treatment. You can take your usual painkillers for headaches unless you have been advised not to. Let the radiographer know if your headaches are troublesome or persistent.

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.

If you continue to experience discomfort, you may be prescribed medication in order to make swallowing 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.

Effects on the bowels

You may notice that your bowels become looser towards the end of your radiotherapy treatment. If this happens, please speak to the radiographers who will be able to provide advice on how to manage this.

Longer-term side effects

Long-term side effects vary, depending on your specific treatment plan. Your doctor will discuss these with you before you start treatment. If you have any concerns or wish to discuss these further, please talk to the radiographers.

Frequently asked questions

Can I continue with my normal activities after treatment?

Yes. However, you may need to make adjustments if you start to feel tired or unwell.

Do I feel anything as the treatment is happening?

No, treatment is quick and painless.

Can I miss treatments?

It is important that you do not miss a treatment once you have started. Occasionally you may be asked to attend on a weekend or a public holiday.

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Parking

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

If you are having radiotherapy treatment you 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**.

Contact us

If you have urgent symptoms relating to your current radiotherapy treatment, please call the acute oncology service at Southampton General Hospital on **023 8120 1345**.

This number is answered 24-hours, seven days a week, but is only for treatment-related symptoms. It is **not** for general queries such as rearranging appointments or hospital transport. 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**.

For any non-urgent queries, please contact the radiotherapy reception.

Radiotherapy reception

Telephone: **023 8120 8568**

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**