

Radiotherapy

Information for Head & Neck Cancer Patients

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet aims to guide you through your treatment and provides some advice on how you can help to look after yourself during treatment and promote recovery. It is important to appreciate that individuals can vary considerably in their sensitivity to radiotherapy and the treatment can be very different for everybody. Treatment can often be difficult, causing many side effects. These will be explained to you, and it is important to remember that the team looking after you will be able to help with many problems or concerns.

Please do not hesitate to ask or phone for advice.

WHAT IS RADIOTHERAPY?

Radiotherapy is a treatment used to destroy cancer cells using X- rays. Although the rays are stronger, and the radiotherapy machines are larger than those used for taking X- ray pictures, it feels no different and is painless. The amount of treatment required is carefully planned and your oncology doctor will tell you how many treatments you will need. This can last up to 7 weeks.

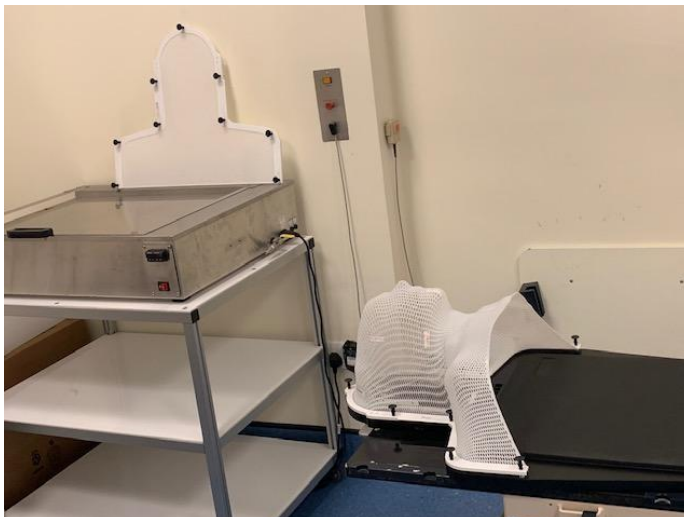
The treatment is given daily, Monday to Friday and the treatment itself lasts approximately 10 minutes. You may be in the department for longer than this however, particularly on Wednesdays and Thursdays when you will be reviewed by members of the team responsible for your care. Once you have started treatment, it is very important that you attend every day as any unplanned gaps can affect the outcome of treatment.

Radiotherapy works by damaging cells in the treated area. Cancer cells are destroyed and although normal cells are also affected, they can repair themselves more effectively. The damage to normal cells is usually temporary, but is the reason that radiotherapy has some unwanted side effects. These will be discussed later in this booklet.

RADIOTHERAPY TREATMENT PLANNING

Radiotherapy needs to be planned for each individual and there will be at least one planning session needed before treatment can start. For your first appointments please report to the reception desk in The Edinburgh Cancer Centre.

The first part of the radiotherapy planning involves a visit to the Mould Room. Patients having radiotherapy to the head and neck region will require a mask to be made which is worn during treatment. This involves using a warmed sheet of plastic which is then moulded to the shape of your face and neck. This is called a mask or beam direction shell and takes 10 minutes to make. This mask helps you stay in exactly the correct position for your treatment – about 10 minutes each day. The mould room technicians and radiographer will make the mask. They will explain the whole procedure to you before they begin. The mould room appointment will take about 20-30mins and is completely painless. A QR code is available and provides a link to a video to show what is involved in this process.



Mould Room: Water Bath and Mask

Your treatment planning continues with a visit to the CT planning scanner. This visit takes approximately 20 - 30 minutes and you will be required to wear the mask during this scan. The scan itself only takes 10 minutes. This usually happens on the same day as the mould room appointment. The machine is very similar to the initial CT scanner you have already been in, but it has sophisticated computer software to allow specialized radiotherapy planning to take place. You may need to have an injection of contrast dye during this time. Your radiographer will explain this to you. Your doctor or the radiographers will explain how many treatments you are to have and when they are to start. Generally, your treatment will be given daily but not at weekends. Once the planning is complete, you will be shown where to come each day for treatment. You will receive an appointment list with all your radiotherapy treatment times before your treatment starts. If you are staying in the hospital during

treatment, either a porter will come and collect you from the ward, or you may be able to walk down each day when the radiographers call for you.



CT Scanner

After the planning but before your radiotherapy starts the doctor will ensure you understand the reason for treatment, what is involved and the likely side effects. The doctor will then ask you if you are willing to proceed with the treatment and you will be asked to sign a consent form.

DENTIST

You may be asked to see a dentist before starting radiotherapy treatment to assess whether any dental work needs to be carried out, as during and after treatment dental work is often difficult. The specialist dental team at the hospital will assess you and deal with any problems before treatment starts.

STOP SMOKING

Smoking during treatment will make the side effects of treatment worse and will delay the healing process. We will refer you for help with stopping smoking.

REDUCE ALCOHOL INTAKE

During treatment you should stop taking alcohol as this can irritate the lining of the mouth or throat. Please ask if you need help and support with this.

MOUTHCARE

You should buy bicarbonate of soda from a supermarket to use as a mouthwash. This is essential during your treatment to keep your mouth as clean as possible.

Pretreatment Checklist

- ☐ Mould room
- ☐ Planning CT scan
- ☐ Consent
- ☐ Dentist
- ☐ Stop smoking
- ☐ Reduce alcohol intake
- ☐ Mouth care

Clinical Nurse Specialists are experienced nurses who can offer information, support and advice to you and your family. If you have not been in contact with or received their contact details, then please ask for their details. Before, during and after treatment they can be contacted if you have any questions or concerns. You can contact them via the Cancer Navigation Hub – 0300 123 1600

RADIOTHERAPY TREATMENT

ON EACH DAY OF YOUR TREATMENT PLEASE REPORT DIRECTLY TO THE RADIOTHEAPY RECEPTION

Your radiotherapy is painless and is generally quicker than your treatment 'planning' procedures. The radiographers will position you carefully, fit your mask and align the treatment machine to the correct treatment areas.

Although the radiographers will be with you during positioning for treatment, they must leave the room whilst the radiotherapy is given although they can see you on a screen.

If you have any questions or worries about your treatment or planning, please do not hesitate to ask.

In both the CT suite and treatment machines we have I-pods. If you like to listen to music or feel that it may help you relax, please feel free to bring some along.

While your treatment, you will be seen routinely once a week, generally on a Thursday, by a nurse, doctor or radiographer. Radiographers will take you to this clinic after your treatment that day. This is to see how the treatment is progressing and gives you the opportunity to discuss any problems or questions that may arise. At this clinic your weight will be taken, and bloods tests may also be required. If you experience any problems out with your review day the radiographers will be happy to help.

Do not hesitate to ask for advice from the team at any time.



Radiotherapy Machine (Linear Accelerator)

SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIOTHERAPY

Side effects of radiotherapy occur due to damage to the cells in the area treated. At first you should not notice any difference due to the treatment, however, as your radiotherapy progresses you will begin to feel the side effects, usually at about the 3rd / 4th week. These side effects will get progressively worse until the end of the treatment and can continue for some weeks afterwards until you slowly start to heal and feel better. As radiotherapy affects people in different ways, it is difficult to predict exactly how you will react to your treatment and the doctor, nurse or radiographer will explain the side effects, you may experience before your treatment begins.

SKIN REACTIONS

The skin in the treatment area receives a dose of radiotherapy. It will become pink and by the end of treatment can be red, sore, and itchy (like sunburn). The skin will begin to peel and may break down and become moist. This usually settles a few weeks after the treatment has finished. To minimize these symptoms:

- The radiographers will give you creams to apply to your skin and provide advice on how and when to apply.
- Wash the area very gently with lukewarm water and a very mild soap such as Baby or Simple soap and pat dry gently with a soft towel.
- Men should use an electric shaver.
- Wear loose fitting cotton clothes, which do not rub the skin.
- Do not use any commercial products.

Avoid perfume, aftershave, creams, and cosmetics and avoid exposing the skin to strong sunlight.

On day 1 of treatment, the radiographers who give you the treatment will give advice on skin care and arrange to get creams to apply.

PAINFUL MOUTH/THROAT

The cells lining the mouth and throat are sensitive to radiation and you will feel sore about 3 or 4 weeks after starting radiotherapy. You will be prescribed mild painkillers initially to help but you will need strong painkillers by the end of the treatment. Please let your radiographer, nurse or doctor know if you are sore as painkillers can be prescribed to help this. You will be reviewed regularly regarding your pain level and given medicines to help manage this.

The radiotherapy treatment often causes a change in saliva making it thick. It also results in mucous developing in the mouth and throat, which can be unpleasant. The mucous (secretions) should be a white or cream colour. If you notice that the mucous has changed colour, please let your doctor or nurse know. Small streaks of blood in your spit are quite common but if it seems a lot, please ask for some advice.

MOUTHCARE

During treatment the lining of the mouth and throat become inflamed and sore, and it is essential that you keep your mouth as clean as possible.

How to care for your mouth

- Brush your teeth very gently 4 times a day (after meals and at night). Use a soft toothbrush and a high fluoride toothpaste.
- If you have dentures remove them at night and soak in suitable cleansing agent e.g. Steredent. Rinse well after soaking.

Mouthwash

Add 1 level teaspoon of Sodium Bicarbonate to 1 pint of water, cover and keep it in the fridge. Rinse your mouth and gargle if you can at least 4 times a day. Do not swallow. If you are troubled with secretions, it may be helpful to use the mouthwash before eating.

After 3 weeks of treatment you must increase this to at least 6 – 8 times a day.

- **Do not use more than 1 level teaspoon to 1 pint of water** (as this can burn the lining of the mouth)
- **Do not use commercial mouthwashes, including Corsodyl**

It can take up to 6 – 8 weeks after finishing treatment for the lining of the mouth and throat to heal. This timing may vary, as everyone is different.

Lips

Do not use Vaseline, lip salve or any other products on your lips. There is a water soluble alternative available. Please just ask.

Dry Mouth

You will find your mouth may become very dry during your treatment. Drink plenty of fluids and carry a small bottle of water with you when you are away from home. It is also advisable to keep water by your bedside. The use of sugar free chewing gum or saliva replacement gel may help. Please ask your doctor or nurse for advice on this.

For some people a dry mouth may be a permanent effect of radiotherapy, and this will be discussed with you.

Taste Changes

The treatment can affect your sense of taste and as the treatment continues you may notice that many foods /drinks may have a different or no taste. Despite this it is very important that you continue to eat as much as you can, and this will help to stimulate the recovery of your tastebuds after treatment.

Trismus

Trismus is difficulty in mouth opening which can be because of your cancer and treatment. The Speech & Language Therapists may give you exercises, and it is extremely important that you do these.

EATING, DRINKING & SWALLOWING

If you are experiencing problems with eating, drinking, or swallowing before the start of treatment this is likely to be due to the position or size of your tumour. You will also experience some difficulty during and after radiotherapy treatment, depending on the area being treated. This can be due to the side effects of radiotherapy e.g. pain, inflammation, muscle stiffness and changes in taste and appetite. You will be seen by the Speech and Language Therapist each week during your treatment, and they will contact you before your treatment begins.

The Speech and Language Therapist will:

- Assess how well you can swallow and identify if there are any problems
- Provide advice regarding the easiest and safest types of food for you to manage
- Provide exercises to help you with swallowing and eating

You must be referred for a swallow assessment if you find that food is sticking in your throat or you cough, choke or become breathless when eating and drinking.

NUTRITION

It is important that you take enough nutrition to maintain your overall wellbeing, prevent infection and promote healing.

The Dietitian will:

- Assess your dietary intake and appetite
- Identify any issues which may be reducing your food intake
- Agree a nutrition plan with you and provide practical advice on how best to meet your nutritional needs
- Monitor your weight on a weekly basis —it is important to try to keep your weight steady so your mask fits correctly and to ensure you body has enough energy for healing during and after treatment

Soft foods may be easier to manage. Your Speech & Language Therapist and

Dietitian will advise on this. Try to eat little and often, and it is important to take 2-3 litres of fluid each day. To help you get enough fluids, nourishment, and medication it may be necessary to consider feeding through a tube. There are different types of tube feeding available. If this is required your doctor, nurse or dietitian will discuss this further with you. It may be necessary to put the tube in before your treatment starts.

HAIR LOSS

This treatment should not cause you to lose all your hair. The radiotherapy enters and exits through the skin and these areas may lose a small area of hair temporarily e.g. on the face and sometimes at the back or side of the head.

TIREDFNESS

You may feel tired during your treatment. It is important to take time to rest if you need to and this tiredness, for some, can last for months following the end of radiotherapy. Regular gentle exercise may help.

VOICE CHANGES

You may notice that your voice becomes hoarse during treatment if your throat is being treated. This usually returns a few weeks after treatment.

ALCOHOL & TOBACCO

Cigarettes, cigars and pipe tobacco are all extremely harmful and will make symptoms from the treatment much worse.

It is therefore essential during treatment that you **DO NOT SMOKE**. We will refer you to the Smoke Free service for smoking.

Drinking spirits is strongly discouraged however **small amounts** of beer or wine are acceptable.

AFTER TREATMENT

On your last day of treatment, you will receive a leaflet with information of what to expect when treatment finishes.

USEFUL CONTACTS

CLINICAL NURSE SPECIALISTS

Lothian & Borders 0300 123 1600 (Cancer Navigation Hub)

Fife 01383 674063

Dumfries & Galloway..... 01387 241217

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES

Maggie's Centre

0131 537 3131 / www.maggiescentres.org/our-centres/maggies-edinburgh

Macmillan Cancer Support www.macmillan.org.uk

REASON TO CALL THE CANCER TREATMENT HOTLINE BEFORE< DURING AND AFTER TREATMENT:

CANCER TREATMENT HELPLINE



REASONS TO CALL THE CANCER TREATMENT HOTLINE BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER TREATMENT:

You should phone immediately if you have received treatment in the last 6 weeks and have:

- a temperature higher than 37.5°C or lower than 36°C
- any sign of infection (e.g. shivering episodes, flu like symptoms, chest infection)

- persistent nausea/vomiting and/or diarrhoea
- bleeding from your gums or nose or unusual bruising
- mouth ulcers that stop you eating or drinking
- been generally unwell.
- any other problem you think may be related to your treatment.

TEAM MEMBERS INVOLVED IN YOUR CARE

Oncologist

Senior doctor with overall responsibility for your medical care.

Clinical Nurse Specialist

Experienced nurse who can offer information, support and advice to you and your family.

Treatment Floor Nurse

Experienced cancer nurse who specialises in radiotherapy treatment and side effects.

Radiographer

Responsible for accurately planning and delivering your radiotherapy treatment.

Mould Room Technician

Responsible for making your mask for treatment and are there to support you during this process.

Dentist

The dentist ensures your mouth is as healthy as possible before the start of radiotherapy by providing any necessary dental treatment or advice to minimise problems during treatment and in the future.

Dietitian

Provide assessment, advice, and support on all aspects of nutrition to meet your nutritional needs.

Speech & Language Therapist

Provides assessment, advice and management for swallowing and communication.

Palliative Care Team Member

Provides support for symptom control such as pain and nausea when it has been difficult to manage.

Complex Nutrition Nurse/Radiologist

Responsible for the insertion of feeding tubes and support post procedure.

