

# General information about radiotherapy

**This information sheet is a general guide to radiotherapy. The treatment and side effects you have from radiotherapy will vary depending on which part of your body you are having treated.**

**If you have any questions, or would like more advice, please ask a member of your treatment team. The team consists of radiographers, doctors and nurses who will help and support you throughout your treatment.**

## What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy uses high energy x-rays (or similar rays) to treat cancer. It damages your body's cells within the treatment area, killing the cancer cells but allowing your normal cells to recover. Its side effects are usually confined to the area you are having treated.

## Planning your treatment

Before your planning appointment you will have been asked to sign a consent form. This is to confirm that you agree to have the radiotherapy treatment. If you have any further questions please ask the radiographers at your first appointment, when they ask you to verbally confirm that you consent to have radiotherapy.

The planning session will take place in the Cancer Centre at Guys or Guy's Cancer at Queen Mary's Hospital. This appointment can take about one hour. Your treatment will be planned using a CT (computerised tomography) scanner. For the CT scan you will need to remove some of your clothing and we will give you a gown to wear.

You will be asked to lie on the couch and the radiographers will move you into position. The couch will move slowly through the open scanner and back, you will not feel anything and nothing will touch you.

**During the procedure we ask that you remain as still as possible and breathe normally.**

At the end of the scan the radiographers will take some measurements and ask your permission to make some small permanent marks on your skin using ink and a needle. These marks show the radiographers exactly where the treatment needs to be given each time.

Before you leave the department we will give you information about your treatment schedule. You can also ask any questions you may have about your treatment.

Treatment will start approximately two weeks after your planning session.

## Treatment

Your doctor will prescribe the amount of radiation needed for your treatment. This amount is then divided up into smaller doses (called fractions) that are given over a period of days or weeks. Treatment is usually given Monday to Friday and occasionally on a Saturday.

On your first day a radiographer will explain your treatment and any possible side effects. Please feel free to ask any questions.

Radiotherapy treatment takes place in the Cancer Centre at Guy's or Guy's Cancer at Queen Mary's Hospital.

## During treatment

Before treatment you will need to change into a gown. You will be in the treatment room for about 15 minutes.



Linear accelerator (linac)  
Image supplied courtesy of  
Varian.

The radiographers will help you into the same position you were in for the planning session. They will then move the treatment machine into position. It will come close to you, but will not touch you.

The machine will move around you to treat from different angles. Each area takes around one to three minutes to treat and you will have the same areas treated each day.

**It is important that you keep still throughout your treatment and breathe normally.**

The radiographers will leave the room to switch the machine on. You will be alone in the room during treatment, but the radiographers will be watching you on monitors. If you need help, raise your arm. The machine can be switched off and the radiographers can return to the room to assist you.

## Treatment review

Treatment support radiographers are available if you have a specific problem with your treatment or any side effects.

## Side effects

The side effects of radiotherapy are usually felt only in the area that you are having treated. You will not experience everything that is in this guide as it will depend on which part of the body you are having treated. The radiographers will give you specific information about the side effects that you may experience during and after your treatment. Possible side effects are:

### Skin reaction

Sometimes people have a skin reaction from radiotherapy. The reaction depends on your skin type, which part of the body you are having treated, and the amount of the radiotherapy that you have. Any reaction will not happen immediately, but can develop over several treatments. The skin in the treatment area may become dry, red and itchy. The reaction may be worse in skin folds, such as the groin, buttocks or under the breast. To reduce the possible reaction, we suggest the following skin care:

- **Moisturising:** Moisturising in the treatment area will help your skin to cope better. You may continue to use your usual moisturiser or if you need to buy one, we recommend one without the additive, sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS). During treatment, apply the moisturiser sparingly twice a day or more often if your skin is very itchy.
- **Washing:** It is important to keep the treatment area clean. Shower/bath using lukewarm water and use your usual soap or shower gel. Aqueous cream may be used as a soap substitute but not as a leave on moisturiser. Use a soft towel to gently pat the skin dry – do not rub.
- **Deodorant:** You may continue to use your normal deodorant unless your skin becomes sore or irritated.
- **Shaving:** Do not wet shave your skin in the treatment area. Dry electric shavers may be used if necessary. Do not use any hair removal creams or wax near to or in the treatment area.
- **Swimming:** Reduce the number of times you swim in chlorinated water as this can have a drying effect on the skin. After swimming, shower to remove excess chlorine and discontinue swimming if the skin becomes sore.
- **Clothing:**  
Wear loose, comfortable clothing, preferably made from natural fibres, such as cotton. Tight, synthetic clothing may make you hot and sweaty, which can irritate your skin.
- **Sun and wind:**  
Do not expose skin in the treatment area to sun during treatment. After radiotherapy your skin will continue to be sensitive for at least a year. In the sun you should protect it with total sun block or cover up, and in the wind use a hat or scarf to cover any exposed skin that has had treatment.

## **Hair loss**

You may lose your hair in the area where you are having radiotherapy. Dimbleby Cancer Care has information on coping with hair loss. Their contact details can be found at the end of this leaflet. If you do not have a wig and would like one, please ask to be referred to the patient appliance department who will help you to choose and fit your wig.

If you have hair loss, your hair may re-grow but it may not be the same colour and texture. The time it takes to grow back will vary for each person.

## **Fatigue**

As treatment progresses you may feel tired and develop 'fatigue'. This is a tiredness which is not entirely relieved by resting and can make physical activity difficult. Some of the things that can contribute to fatigue are:

- travelling to the hospital for treatment
- change to your daily routine
- change to your eating habits
- dehydration
- reduced physical activity
- interrupted sleep
- emotions.

Macmillan Cancer Support produces a free booklet that may be helpful, **Coping with fatigue**. To get this booklet, please contact Macmillan using the contact details given at the end of this information sheet.

## **Constipation or diarrhoea**

The combination of radiotherapy and some medicines can change your bowel habits. If you have any changes, tell the radiographers or nurses who will be able to advise you.

## **Other side effects**

Please tell the radiographers if you are concerned about any other effects of your radiotherapy treatment. We will be able to help and advise you.

## **After radiotherapy**

The side effects from the radiotherapy reach a peak about 7-10 days after you have finished treatment.

Any side effects you have experienced may continue to get worse during this period. You may develop side effects if you have not had any. The radiographers will explain this more fully and advise you.

Sometimes people feel anxious at the end of their treatment. You will need time to recover physically and emotionally.

## **Follow-up appointments**

You will have a follow-up appointment between two and six weeks after your course of radiotherapy ends. This will be with a doctor at the cancer centre or with the doctor who referred you to us.

You will be given details of how to make this appointment.

### **After treatment skin care**

Depending on your course of treatment, your skin may be red and sore, and you will need to continue to use a moisturiser. If your skin is broken, you will need to see the treatment support team for advice, and possibly a dressing. You may need to return to the department or visit your local GP practice nurse.

Carry on with the same skin care until your skin does not look red or feel sore, and then slowly introduce your usual washing routine. If your skin starts to feel sore again, return to using warm water and try again after a week.

### **After treatment diet**

If you changed your diet to cope with the side effects, continue with this for a couple of weeks. Slowly introduce foods that you stopped. If your throat is sore, continue with the same mouth care that you used during your treatment. Eat soft food that is not too hot or too spicy. Your taste buds may take three months or more to recover, and you may find that you have less saliva. It is important that you drink plenty of fluids each day.

## **Your radiotherapy team**

**Clinical oncologist** is a doctor trained in the use of radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

**Radiographer** – A therapy radiographer gives you your radiotherapy and will be able to help and advise you during your treatment.

**Nurses** carry out nursing procedures such as changing dressings and managing the clinics.

**Students** – This is a teaching hospital. There are supervised student radiographers in the radiotherapy department. Please tell a radiographer if you do not want students to be present. Your wishes will always be respected.

## **Information and support**

Many people find it hard to cope with what is happening to them and feel anxious or depressed. It can be helpful to know that most people find these feelings ease with time. Try to discuss your concerns with the staff that are involved in your treatment, as well as your family and friends. Talking to other people can help you to find the answers to your questions.

Dimbleby Cancer Care and the Dimbleby Macmillan Support Centre both provide a range of information and support. Please see the next page for more information and contact details. The following charities can also offer information and support:

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

t: 0808 808 0000 (freephone)

w: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

### **Cancer Research UK**

t: 0808 800 4040 (freephone)

w: [www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)

Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals offer a range of cancer-related information leaflets for patients and carers, available at [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/cancer-leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/cancer-leaflets). For information leaflets on other conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your radiotherapy treatment, please contact the member of staff caring for you via the radiotherapy reception at the **Cancer Centre at Guy's** on **020 7188 7188 (extension 57542 / 57569)** or the main reception at **Guy's Cancer at Queen Mary's Hospital** on **020 7188 0770**. If you have a problem in the evening or weekend, please contact the main switchboard on **020 7188 7188** and ask for 'operator' or dial 0. You should then ask the operator for the Clinical Oncology registrar on call.



**Dimbleby Cancer Care** has a drop-in information area staffed by specialist nurses and offers complementary therapies, psychological support and benefits advice for patients and carers. We're located in the Welcome Village of the Cancer Centre at Guy's. **t:** 020 7188 5918 **e:** [DimblebyCancerCare@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:DimblebyCancerCare@gstt.nhs.uk)

The **Dimbleby Macmillan Support Centre** at Guy's Cancer at Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup offers information, psychological support and complementary therapies.

**t:** 020 7188 0771 **e:** [DimblebyCancerCare@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:DimblebyCancerCare@gstt.nhs.uk)

## Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the clinical nurse specialist or other member of staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

## Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

## Language and Accessible Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch: **t:** 020 7188 8815 **e:** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

## NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 111

## NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

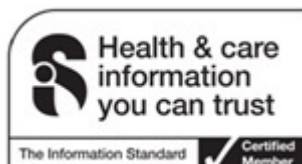
Leaflet number: 1767/VER7

Date published: May 2017

Review date: November 2019

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A list of sources is available on request



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