

# Radiotherapy for brain tumours

**This information booklet is about radiotherapy for brain tumours. 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 all help and support you through your treatment.**

## What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy uses radiation (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 generally isolated 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 when they ask you to verbally confirm that you wish to have radiotherapy.

## Mould room appointment and planning

Your first appointment will be in the mould room and CT scanner at the Cancer Centre at Guy's. In the mould room you will have a plastic mask (also called a shell) made which you will need to wear during your treatment. The shell helps you to keep still for your treatment.

If you have any swelling in your face, please tell us as we will need to assess this before we make your mask.



Picture courtesy of National Cancer Institute

The mask needs to fit properly. If you have a beard, you will need to trim it, or you may prefer to shave it off. If you need to have your hair cut, please do this before we make your mask.

We will provide you with a gown and you will need to undress from the waist up. Women are advised to wear trousers or skirt rather than a dress. Any jewellery worn on the face or neck area will have to be removed.

The shell is made by moulding a piece of plastic softened in warm water over your face and chin. The plastic will take approximately 10 minutes to harden. When the mask has set it will be removed.

To plan your treatment you will need to wear your mask and have a CT scan.

The CT scanner takes a series of x-rays of the treatment area. You will lie on a couch that passes through the machine slowly, and the machine will not touch you.

You will be alone in the room during the scan, but the radiographers will be watching you all the time on closed circuit television. If you need assistance raise your arm and the radiographers can return to the room.

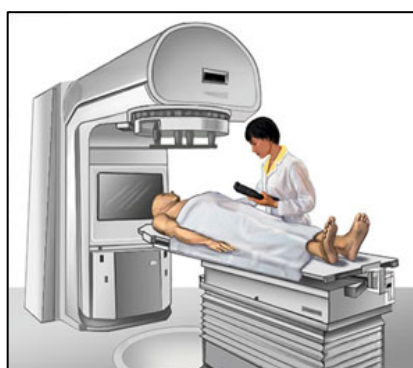
## Treatment

Treatment will start in a few weeks when your personal plan is ready. Your doctor will prescribe the amount of radiation needed and it is given in small daily doses called fractions. This may be between three and six weeks. Treatment is usually given daily Monday to Friday.

It is important that you attend for all your treatments, however if you feel unwell contact the department for advice. Contact details are on page 5 of this leaflet.

When you arrive for your first appointment please report to the reception desk, where you will be directed to the treatment area. A radiographer will explain your treatment, and discuss possible side effects. Please feel free to mention any concerns that you have.

You will lie on the treatment couch wearing your mask (shell). The radiographers will move the machine into position. It will come close to you but will not touch you. When you are in position the radiographers will leave the room to switch the machine on.



Picture courtesy of National Cancer Institute

You will be alone in the room during your treatment, but the radiographers will be watching you all the time on closed circuit television. If you need assistance, raise your arm and the radiographers can return to the room.

At each appointment you will be in the treatment room for about 15 minutes. (On the first day you may be in the room for about 30 minutes to allow additional checks to be done). There may be some music playing in the background and you will hear some noises from the machine.

After the first part of the treatment, the radiographers will move the machine remotely (from outside the room) to the next area to be treated. Each area takes around two minutes to treat and you will have the same areas treated each day. It is important that you keep as still as possible throughout your treatment and breathe normally.

During your first week of treatment and at intervals during your course of treatment, images will be taken. These are to confirm and check the position of your treatment.

## Side effects during radiotherapy

Radiotherapy to the brain does have side effects. The severity of these side effects depends on many factors and can be more severe for some people than others. Any reaction may not happen immediately, but can develop after several treatments and reach a peak 7 to 10 days after treatment finishes.

We give the treatment to a specific area and side effects only happen in that area.

## Skin reaction

It is common to have a skin reaction from radiotherapy. The reaction depends on the area treated, and the amount of the treatment that you have. Skin in the treatment area may become dry, red and itchy. To reduce the possible reaction, we suggest the following:

### 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.

If your skin is dry or you are in discomfort, ask advice from the radiographers or your review team. Do not use the cream if your skin is broken.

### Washing

It is important to keep the treatment area clean. Shower/bath using lukewarm water and use your usual shampoo, 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.

### Shaving

Do not wet shave the skin in the treatment area. Do not use any hair removal creams or wax near to or in the treatment area. If really necessary a dry electric shaver can be used.

### Sun

The skin in the treatment area will be more sensitive to the sun during radiotherapy. It will continue to be sensitive for at least a year after radiotherapy. In the sun you should protect it with total sun block or cover up. In the wind use a hat or scarf. For at least a year after treatment, continue to protect your skin in the treatment area from the weather with sun block or a scarf. It will continue to be more sensitive to the sun.

### 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.

### Skin care

Seven to ten days after treatment, any skin reaction and side effects may become worse. This is a normal reaction to radiotherapy. Healing can take a couple of months.

## Hair loss

You will lose the hair in the area that is being treated. This usually starts during the second or third week of treatment. It will usually grow back three to six months after treatment although it may grow back finer or a different colour.

## Tiredness

You may find that you feel tired during treatment. The treatment affects your healthy cells, and although these can repair themselves, this requires extra energy. Travelling to and from hospital can also make you feel tired. Try to rest when you can and ask your friends and family to help with any everyday activities.

Macmillan Cancer Support produces a booklet called **Coping with Fatigue** that may be helpful (contact details for Macmillan can be found on page 4 of this booklet).

## Worsening of symptoms

Radiotherapy can cause swelling of the brain and this can cause symptoms to become slightly worse. These may include headaches, weakness of the limbs, increase in seizures, speech or memory problems. Your steroid doses may need to be adjusted if these symptoms occur as this will reduce the swelling.

Please speak to the radiographers, doctors or nurses as soon as you notice any change in symptoms.

## After treatment

The side effects from treatment may continue to get worse for up to 7 to 10 days after treatment has finished and then gradually improve. If you are worried about any of these side effects, please contact us on **020 7188 4220** for advice.

## Follow-up appointment

You will be seen by your doctor at the Cancer Centre four weeks after your radiotherapy. Two months after this you will have a scan and will be seen in clinic to discuss your treatment progress.

## Coping with cancer

Being diagnosed with a brain tumour may bring specific concerns. These may include having someone to talk to about your diagnosis, continuing with social and work engagements, and personal relationships. You may find that you need extra help to come to terms with the problems that cancer can cause.

Discussing your concerns with staff, your friends and family is important. It can help you to find answers to questions you may be asking yourself, as well as finding new ways to manage situations.

## Support group

There is a monthly drop-in support group for people with brain tumours and their carers. For more information, please contact Dimpleby Cancer Care (contact details are on page 5).

## Useful sources of information

### The Brain Tumour Charity

t: 0808 800 0004

w: [www.thebraintumourcharity.org](http://www.thebraintumourcharity.org)

### Brain Tumour Action

t: 0131 466 3116

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

### Cancer Research UK

t: 0808 800 4040

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

### Macmillan Cancer Support (freephone)

t: 0808 808 0000 (information on all aspects of cancer)

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

## Contact us

You can contact the radiotherapy reception on 020 7188 7188 (enter extension 57542 or 57569). If you have a specific problem with your treatment or any side effects, please speak to the radiographers. If you have a problem in the evening or weekend, call the main switchboard on 020 7188 7188 and ask for 'operator' or press 0. Then ask the operator for the clinical oncology registrar on call.

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)



**Dimbleby Cancer Care** provides cancer support services for Guy's and St Thomas'. We have a drop-in information area staffed by specialist nurses and offer complementary therapies, psychological support and benefits advice for patients and carers.

Dimbleby Cancer Care is 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)

## 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: 2465/VER5

Date published: November 2016

Review date: November 2019

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