

# Radiotherapy for skin cancer

**This information leaflet is about radiotherapy for skin cancer. 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.**

**Contact phone numbers can be found on page 3 of this leaflet.**

## Skin cancer

### **Basal cell carcinoma**

This is the most common type of skin cancer. It is very slow growing and does not spread to other parts of the body.

However it will not go away without some form of treatment, for example surgery, liquid nitrogen or radiotherapy.

### **Squamous cell carcinoma**

The second most common type of skin cancer. It is slow growing but may spread to other parts of the body if left untreated.

## 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 generally isolated to the area you are having treated.

The radiotherapy you receive will either be low-energy x-rays (superficial) or electrons. This will depend on the area being treated.

## Length of treatment

Your doctor will prescribe the amount of radiation needed for your treatment. This may be given in one treatment or divided up into smaller doses (called 'fractions') that are given over a period of days or weeks.

## Treatment

You will see a specialist cancer doctor (an oncologist). This appointment may be at the Cancer Centre at Guy's or at another hospital where the doctor has a clinic.

The doctor will tell you about your course of radiotherapy and any possible side effects. You will be 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.

## Planning

This takes place in:

### **Cancer Centre at Guy's, Radiotherapy Village**

Before you can start your radiotherapy, the treatment has to be planned specifically for you.

You will need to lie on the treatment couch. A doctor or radiographer will use a bright light and a magnifying glass to look at the area of your body that needs to be treated. If required, marks will be put onto your skin with a felt pen to outline the area(s) of treatment. If there is a scab on your skin cancer the doctor may need to remove it.

The radiographer will record the treatment area by taking measurements and with your consent, a photograph.

## During treatment

We may need to protect an area around the treatment site with a thin sheet of lead placed on your skin. It is not heavy and it will not hurt.

Part of the radiotherapy machine will rest on your skin during treatment. You may feel a small amount of pressure on your skin because of this. The treatment is painless and will not hurt.

The radiographer will leave the room while the treatment is being given but will watch you on closed circuit television. If you need help, raise your hand. The radiographer can stop the treatment at any time and return to the room to help you.

Treatment can last between two and eight minutes. **During treatment it is important that you keep still, but you can breathe normally.**

When your treatment ends, the radiographer will remove the skin marks. You will be given details of further appointments if required and advice on how to look after your skin.

## Side effects during radiotherapy

To help minimise the skin reaction it is important you look after your skin during treatment and until your skin reaction has settled. Ask the radiographer if you need any further advice.

### **If your skin is unbroken:**

- Wash the area gently with tepid water and your usual soap or shower gel
- Blot the area dry with a soft towel, do not rub.
- Keep the area moisturised.
- Do not use make-up or any other products on the treated area.
- Shaving – Dry shave with an electric razor around the treatment area.
- Swimming – Do not use swimming pools while having treatment or until your skin reaction has settled.

If your treatment area is on or close to your nose, you may have a small amount of bleeding from the nostril. Some crusting can occur inside the nose. If this happens, apply a little petroleum jelly (Vaseline) gently with your fingertip to help soften the skin and make it more comfortable.

Some doctors may prescribe special creams for use during your radiotherapy treatment on your skin and in your nose. Use these as prescribed.

**Ask the radiographers for further advice if:**

- you are having treatment on your cheek or around your mouth and you get a reaction on the skin inside your mouth
- if your skin becomes broken in the treatment area.

If necessary you will be given special dressings, instructions on how to use them and how to look after your skin.

## Follow-up appointment

You will have a follow-up appointment with either your oncologist or dermatologist eight weeks after your treatment has finished. If on your last day of treatment you do not know when this is, please ask the radiographers.

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your radiotherapy please contact the **Radiotherapy Department** on **020 7188 7188 (enter extension 57542 or 57569)**.

If you have a problem in the evening or on a weekend, please contact the main switchboard **020 7188 7188** and ask for 'operator' or press 0. Then ask the operator for the clinical oncology registrar on call.

## Psychological support

There is a clinical psychologist especially for those affected by skin cancers. Her aim is to help you live better with the diagnosis and to reduce distress. If you would like to talk to the clinical psychologist, you can ask your doctor or clinical nurse specialist to refer you, or call 020 7188 7188 (extension 51874).

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)

## Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, and to become a member:

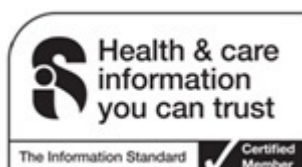
**t:** 0800 731 0319 **e:** [members@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk) **w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership)

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