Radiotherapy to the oesophagus

Information for patients

The aim of this leaflet is to provide you with information about radiotherapy to the oesophagus, including the reasons for giving radiotherapy, details of the treatment and side effects that you may experience.

Although you may have heard about radiotherapy from other patients it is important to remember that their experience may not be the same as yours. If you have any questions please let us know. We are here to help and are happy to talk through any concerns.

What is radiotherapy?
Radiotherapy is one of the treatments that can be given for cancer of the oesophagus (gullet or swallowing tube).

Radiotherapy uses precise, carefully measured doses of high energy x-rays to treat cancer. Cancer cells are more sensitive to radiation than normal cells. The x-rays either destroy the cancer cells or stop them from growing.

Radiation also damages normal cells in or around the area being treated causing side effects, but these will usually recover and heal. The aim of treatment is to destroy the cancer cells while protecting the healthy cells as much as possible.

The dose and time over which treatment is given may vary between patients. Your doctor will discuss this with you.

The specialist team looking after you will help you to understand the treatment and answer any questions you may have. Do please ask us about anything which is bothering you, however insignificant it may seem.

Chemotherapy with radiotherapy
Your oncologist may advise you to be treated with both chemotherapy and radiotherapy at the same time. Your doctor will discuss this with you and explain how your appointments will be arranged. The nursing staff in charge of the chemotherapy will explain this side of the treatment to you and the radiotherapy review specialists will help to co-ordinate your appointments and care, including any blood test you may need. Any side affects you experience may be more pronounced when having radiotherapy and chemotherapy together.

Preparing for your treatment
Before your treatment can start we need to tailor it to your specific needs. You will need to attend the radiotherapy department for a planning scan. This is a different scan from your
previous ones and is needed to design your treatment. This is to reduce the treated area and minimise side effects.

During the scanning session the radiographers mark three tiny, permanent skin marks. These are used to make sure that you are accurately positioned for your treatment each day.

Depending on the area to be treated they may arrange for you to have a specially made mask to help keep your neck still during your treatment. They will explain this to you if it is needed.

**Treatment**

Each session takes approximately 15 minutes. Most of this time is spent making sure you are in the correct position. The actual treatment lasts a few minutes, during which you will be alone in the room. You will be asked to lie still on a couch while the radiotherapy machine moves around you, giving treatment from different directions. The radiographers will be observing and, if necessary, will be able to talk to you from the next room where they will be able to hear you at all times. You will not feel anything and the machine will not touch you.

**Side effects during radiotherapy**

You may develop side effects as you go through the treatment. Most side effects develop about half way through the course of treatment and continue for a short while afterwards. The radiotherapy review specialist will see you weekly during your treatment. They will ask you about any symptoms you may be experiencing and may take a blood test.

- You may have some discomfort in your chest when you swallow. This can feel like heartburn or indigestion. It can even feel like food is getting stuck when swallowed, due to irritation of your oesophagus. This can be lessened by eating a softer diet and by avoiding very spicy foods. The radiotherapy review specialists can help you manage this.
- You may feel sick. The radiotherapy review specialist can help you manage this. If you have difficulty eating because of nausea or pain, they can help you manage this and refer you to a dietician if needed.
- Radiotherapy may irritate your airway and lungs. The treatment is planned so that this is kept to a minimum but you may develop a dry cough or become breathless. Please let the radiotherapy review specialists know about this so they can help you.
- Your skin may become slightly discoloured over the treated area. We advise you not to soak in hot baths. Use a mild, non-perfumed soap and pat the area dry rather than rubbing it. Do not use talcum powder or any lotions and creams other than those advised by us. Cream is available from the radiotherapy review specialist if you need it and wearing loose, natural fibre clothing also helps.
- You may notice that your body hair falls out in the treated area. This only happens in the area that has been treated and may grow back depending on the dose of radiotherapy.
- Radiotherapy may make you tired. Gentle exercise can help, but save your energy for activities you enjoy doing.
- Smoking can make your radiotherapy reaction worse so please speak to the radiotherapy review specialists about cutting down.
Alcohol will make your throat uncomfortable so we advise that you limit your intake to a very occasional glass of wine, beer or watered down spirit.

You may experience some or all of these side effects. Please tell us about them so that we can help and advise you. They may reach a peak two to three weeks after your treatment ends but will gradually settle. The time this takes varies from person to person.

You will be seen regularly during your treatment. Always let the radiotherapy team know of anything worrying you. They want to help you recover as soon as possible.

Possible long term side effects
The way your treatment is planned aims to reduce long term side effects, but you may experience the following. Please discuss these with your doctor at your consultations.

- Radiotherapy can cause tightening (stricture) of the tissues of the oesophagus and for some people this makes swallowing more difficult. You will be given advice and treatment if this occurs.
- The treatment can cause some scarring to your lungs, which may cause breathing problems or a cough. Your doctor will talk to you in detail about this, if it applies.
- Very rarely the rib bones may be weakened by radiotherapy which may make it more likely that you break a rib rather than just bruise if you fall on them in the future.
- The spinal cord lies very close to the oesophagus. Very rarely, people can experience problems with nerve weakness or pain because of radiotherapy, but the planning process is designed to ensure the spinal cord receives a safe dose of radiotherapy.

After treatment finishes
You will be seen regularly by the radiotherapy review specialist until your side effects are getting better and then by your oncologist, six to eight weeks after you finish treatment. If you have any concerns, please contact the radiotherapy review specialist.

Support available at the Royal Free Hospital
We have a number of support services available for you to access. If you would like to know more about them, please read our leaflet: ‘What support is available to you on a diagnosis of cancer?’ or pick up a copy in the Macmillan cancer information and support centre at the Royal Free Hospital.

We are here to help, and if you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to a member of staff.
Contact telephone numbers

Our contact numbers

- Radiotherapy review specialist: 020 7830 2919
- Radiotherapy department reception: 020 7830 2919
- Radiotherapy information service: 020 7472 6739
- Radiotherapy and oncology counsellors: 020 7472 6739

Other useful contacts and websites

Macmillan Cancer Support

- Macmillan cancer information and support centre at the Royal Free Hospital: 020 7794 0500 ext 31337
- Macmillan cancer information and support centre at Barnet Hospital: 020 8216 4142
- Macmillan’s support line: 0808 808 0000
- Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Oesophageal Patients Association

- Phone: 012 1704 9860
- Website: www.opa.org.uk

More information

For more information about cancer services at the Royal Free London, please visit our website: www.royalfree.nhs.uk/services/services-a-z/cancer-services

Your feedback

This booklet was written by staff from the radiotherapy department. If you have any comments on this leaflet please call 020 7472 6739 and leave a message for the information officer.

Alternatively, please email: rf.communications@nhs.net

Alternative formats

This leaflet is also available in large print. If you need this leaflet in another format – for example Braille, a language other than English or audio – please speak to a member of staff.