Radiotherapy to the skin

Information for patients

There are several treatment options available to try and eliminate skin cancers. These include surgery, radiotherapy, cryotherapy and curettage. Your specialist will have discussed the best option for you.

The aim of this leaflet is to provide you with information about radiotherapy to the skin, including details of the procedure 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 uses precise, carefully measured doses of 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 after treatment. The aim of treatment is to destroy the cancer cells while avoiding and protecting the healthy cells as much as possible.

The specialist team looking after you will help you to understand the treatment and answer any questions you may have. If you have any doubts or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to a member of your healthcare team, however insignificant it may seem.

Preparing for your treatment
On your first visit to the radiotherapy department the area to be treated will be confirmed. We will use a marker pen to clearly identify the area and also take an outline of the area being treated – we will usually remove these marks. With your permission, we will also take photographs of the area.

If the area is irregular, it may be necessary to have an individual lead template made to protect the tissue we do not wish to treat. The treatment usually will not start until the second visit.
Sometimes, if the lesion is very close to the eye, an internal protection may be used to cover the eye. To apply this, you are first given some local anaesthetic eye drops and after a couple of minutes the special ‘lead contact lens’ is inserted and left in place just for the treatment. It is removed after the treatment and some protective antibiotic eye drops will be applied. You will need to wear an eye patch for a couple of hours to prevent anything getting into the eye until the effects of the anaesthetic eye drops wear off.

**Treatment**

Treatment is given on a superficial x-ray machine, so called because it emits low energy x-rays which do not penetrate far before they are absorbed. It is also sometimes known as the skin unit.

You will usually be positioned lying on the couch in a comfortable position. The radiographer giving the treatment will position the machine so it touches the skin around the area to be treated, as marked out by your doctor. There is no sensation from the treatment and it is painless.

You will be in the treatment room for about 10 minutes each day. The actual treatment only takes a few minutes during which you will be left in the room alone. 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.

**How many treatments will I need?**

Radiotherapy treatment is typically given in 10 treatment sessions, Monday to Friday, over a period of two weeks. This allows the normal cells to recover from the damage between each treatment.

Sometimes treatment is given in a fewer number of sessions and your radiotherapy consultant will decide and explain the exact schedule that is right for your treatment.

Please allow yourself an hour in the department each day, though often the visit will not take this long. More time will be needed for your first appointment when we are planning your treatment.

**Appointment details**

You will usually be given your radiotherapy appointment in clinic after seeing your doctor. If we aren’t able to arrange this, a member of the radiotherapy team will contact you with the date and time of your first appointment.

If you require hospital transport please contact the transport office to arrange
this at least 48 hours before your appointment. Fares to the hospital may be claimed for those on low income and benefits, please ask for details.

Where do I go for treatment?
The skin unit is located in the radiotherapy department. The department is located on the ground floor of the Royal Free Hospital. It can be accessed via a separate entrance to the side of the main hospital entrance. You can also follow signs to the heart attack centre.

Skin care
While on treatment we advise you to wash the area with mild soap or aqueous cream and to keep it as dry as possible. You should not apply any cream or lotions to the treated area until any reaction from the treatment has settled down; this includes cosmetics if you are having your face treated.

If you are having treatment near the hair line, be careful when washing your hair and do not use a hair dryer near the area we are treating – allow it to dry naturally.

It is advisable not to use a wet razor, shaving cream or any after shave lotions on the area being treated. An electric razor can be used.

It is better to keep the treated area out of strong winds and sunlight as these can irritate the skin and make the reaction worse. Try to avoid clothes rubbing the treated area.

Our radiotherapy review specialist will see you at the end of treatment and advise you about future skin care.

Side effects of radiotherapy treatment
Towards the end of the course of treatment your skin may start to become red and irritable. A scab may form and may stay for several weeks before eventually peeling away and leaving fresh, clean, healthy skin underneath. It is not unusual for a new scab to form after the first scab has fallen off. This may happen a few times before the skin eventually heals after a few weeks.

Your skin will continue to be affected for several weeks after the treatment has finished. You may find that the skin remains red for some time. Occasionally, the area may become increasingly red and sore or the scab can ooze pus, suggesting that there is an infection. If you feel that the skin has become infected or you are worried after you have finished treatment please contact us.
In a few areas – most notably where the treatment area is on the calf, the shin or on the back – it may take several months for the skin to heal.

**Late side effects**
For most people the cosmetic result is excellent. We can usually identify the treated area as being slightly paler and thinner than the surrounding skin, and as the years go by, very fine blood vessels may become visible within the treated area.

The treated area will be more sensitive to the sun and a sunblock of SPF 30 or above cream should be used. Please limit the amount of time you are exposed to the sun.

**After treatment finishes**
Side effects may get worse for two weeks after radiotherapy has finished but will then start to improve. Most side effects should have settled by the time you are seen in clinic eight weeks later. If you have any concerns, please contact the radiotherapy review specialist.

**Follow-up**
You may continue to have appointments with the radiotherapy review specialist nurse until you are both happy with the skin reaction and healing process.

You will be seen by the doctor in the out-patient clinic about eight weeks after completing radiotherapy and then every three to six months if necessary.

Please ask if you are concerned about any aspect of your treatment.
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

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

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.

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 ask a member of staff.

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