

Radiotherapy for Cancer of the face, mouth & neck

Oncology and Clinical Haematology

The prevention of infection is a major priority in all healthcare and everyone has a part to play.

- Please decontaminate your hands frequently for 20 seconds using soap and water or alcohol gel if available
- If you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting, cough or other respiratory symptoms, a temperature or any loss of taste or smell please do not visit the hospital or any other care facility and seek advice from 111
- Keep the environment clean and tidy
- Let's work together to keep infections out of our hospitals and care homes.

Introduction

Your Radiotherapy Doctor has offered you radiotherapy to the face, mouth or neck. This leaflet has been written to explain about the radiotherapy treatment and to answer some of the questions you might have.

Agreeing to treatment

It is important that you understand all about your treatment. You will be provided with the information you need before consenting to treatment such as:

- The benefits of the treatment
- The risks of the treatment
- Other treatments available
- What the treatment involves and how long it will take
- How you feel during and after treatment
- The side effects that you may experience.

It is important to ask any questions regarding your treatment before consenting. However there will be further opportunities to discuss any concerns you may have before the radiotherapy treatment starts.

You will be asked to confirm your consent to radiotherapy on your first day of treatment.

What would happen if I decided not to have radiotherapy?

Your Radiotherapy Doctor will be able to discuss what might happen if you decide not to have radiotherapy treatment. They will also be able to discuss any other treatment choices you might consider.

What about my medicines?

Please tell the radiographers about any tablets or medicines you take and remember to bring all your medicines with you on your first visit. We will be able to tell you if you need to change how you take your medicine.

Important message for Ladies

Radiotherapy will cause harm to an unborn child. Please tell us if you have missed a period or think you may be pregnant. It is important that you do not become pregnant throughout the treatment process; your Radiotherapy Doctor must discuss this with you. You will be asked to confirm that you are not pregnant at various stages of the radiotherapy process.

What is radiotherapy treatment?

Radiotherapy is the treatment of cancer with measured doses of radiation. The treatment does not make you radioactive and you are safe to be with other people. It is often given in small doses over a specified period of days or weeks, but may be given in a single treatment. It is given by therapeutic radiographers who operate the machines which direct high-energy rays to the precise area needing treatment. The radiographers are specially trained professional men and women. They will be able to answer any questions or concerns you may have.



How does radiotherapy work?

Radiotherapy aims to do one of two things. Either, destroy cancer cells in the area being treated or help to reduce any symptoms you may have from your cancer. Your radiotherapy doctor will discuss which applies to you. Radiation has an effect on both normal and cancer cells. However its effect is greater on cancer cells. Normal healthy cells can repair themselves more effectively and any damage to them is usually temporary.

When will I get my appointment for radiotherapy preparation?

Your Consultant will send you for a dental assessment and you may require some dental extractions. If you are not given an appointment when you consent to radiotherapy, a booking Coordinator will call after your dental assessment with an appointment for your first visit.

This is called a computerized tomography (CT) planning scan appointment, which is usually within two weeks after the first meeting.

Why is there a delay before starting radiotherapy treatment?

How soon the planning stage of your treatment will begin depends on the reason for your radiotherapy. Your first appointment to plan the treatment may be a few days or weeks after you first saw the Radiotherapy Doctor. When radiotherapy is part of a combined treatment plan (with surgery or chemotherapy), you may be given dates for your radiotherapy some time ahead.

What happens during my treatment planning?

Treatment planning starts with an appointment in the mould room. Any treatment to the head may involve having a plastic shell (mask) made to hold your head steady. This shell is worn for 10-15 minutes while you are being treated every day. The mask will be kept safe in the treatment room for you.

If you wear dentures you will be asked to remove them for the process and for all of your treatments. You will be able to continue to wear them at other times.

The shell is made in the mould room. To make the treatment shell you will be asked to lie down on your back (this will be the position you will be in for every treatment).

Your radiotherapy treatment shell will be made out of Orfit (a form of plastic mesh). The plastic mesh is heated in a water bath which makes the plastic soft and stretchy. This plastic is then stretched over your head. This will feel warm at first but as the plastic cools down it also sets. This process takes only a few minutes.

Your next appointment will be done using a computerized tomography (CT) scanner, and the scans will be used to give enough information to allow the radiotherapy treatment to be planned accurately. The scans that are taken are not used to assess the cancer.



The appointment can take approximately 30 minutes. You will be asked to lie in the same position as mould room. This is the position you will be in for all of your radiotherapy treatment. We may use additional equipment to help to position you for treatment, it is important that this is comfortable for you to manage for each daily treatment lasting approximately 15 minutes.

The use of contrast during your treatment planning

In addition to the scan, your Doctor may also request a procedure in which the radiographers inject some dye into your blood stream. This involved inserting a needle into a vein in your arm or wrist through which dye is administered during the scan. This is so that the structures show clearly on the scan, aiding the Doctor in planning your treatment.

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire with the radiographer before the procedure, and you may also be asked to have a blood test. This is to make sure that it is appropriate for the radiographers to administer the dye. If you are aware of any reasons why you are not suitable to have this procedure, please inform your Doctor or the radiographers. This procedure is only carried out during the scan and will not be used when you have your treatment.

Possible side effects from contrast

As the contrast is injected, you may feel a little warm. It is not uncommon to have a metallic-like taste in your mouth. Many patients also feel as if their bladder is very full. These are all normal reactions. However, if you begin to feel nauseous, dizzy, breathless or faint you will be asked to stay in the department after the scan for approximately 15mins to monitor for any side effects.

How will I get to the hospital?

You will be asked regarding your travel arrangements for treatment and preference for the time of your treatment appointments. We can consider your requests, however we cannot always guarantee a specific time each day.

Many patients are able to bring themselves for treatment. However if you require hospital transport, you will be given information on how to arrange this. There is not space for friends and family to travel with you in the ambulance / hospital car unless you have a medical reason for needing an escort.

A local support group in the Dudley area may also be able to provide transport, and the radiographers will give you information on this also.

Car Park P4 is the nearest to the Deanesly Centre and there are disabled parking spaces near the entrance.

There can be delays for some time either side of your appointment because of the high demand for transport. Please take this into account when you are deciding whether to use ambulance transport or not.

When will I get my treatment appointment?

There will be a few weeks before the radiotherapy treatment starts. You will normally be contacted by telephone to inform you of your start date. Due to the planning process, you may only be given a day or two notice of when the treatment will start. Please ensure that you give the correct contact details so we are able to contact you easily.

Can I choose my appointment time?

The treatment units treat lots of patients during the day. We cannot always promise you the exact time every day. You will be asked at your CT appointment your preference of time, which will be considered when we book your treatment appointments. Please give us plenty of warning if you have specific time requests.

How often do I need to come for treatment?

Your treatment is individual and designed for you. Your Radiotherapy Doctor will discuss with you the total number of treatments that you need and how often you will need to attend the department.

The centre is open Monday to Friday each week. Most patients are treated once on each day of the week.

What happens when I have radiotherapy treatment?

When you arrive for your treatment please check in at the reception desk. They will let the radiographers know you have arrived. You may find that you are not called for treatment in the order that you arrived in the department. This is because we have different treatment machines for different radiotherapy treatments.

We will always try to keep to your appointment time however please be aware there may be delays. The staff will inform you if there is a delay for your appointment.

A radiographer will discuss the treatment and how to minimise the side effects. They will also check that you are still happy to go ahead with treatment. This is the time to ask any remaining questions or discuss any concerns you may have, even if they seem like silly questions.

You will be collected from the waiting room and taken to the treatment room when it is your treatment time and asked to change into a gown to wear when you are in the treatment room. The radiographers will position you on the treatment couch.

The couch is raised so it is closer to the radiotherapy machine. The radiographers will dim the room lights so that they can see the laser lights. They will then move you to line up pre-set marks on your mask to place you into the correct position for treatment.

When you are in the correct position the radiotherapy machine will move around you, parts of the machine may come close to you and even touch you, but at no time will you feel any pain or pressure. The radiographers will inform you when they are leaving the room to start the treatment.

During your treatment you will be alone in the room; however the radiographers operate the machine from the control area which is close by and will watch you on closed circuit television. If you are in any distress please raise your arm or call out, whichever is most suitable, and the treatment can be stopped. For your own safety, please do not try to get off the couch as it is raised up off the floor.

For some treatments the radiographers may move the machine around you to perform a quick scan or X-ray. This allows them to look at more pictures to ensure you are in the correct position. These pictures cannot be used to assess your response to radiotherapy.

There is nothing to feel and nothing to see during treatment. The machine makes a buzzing noise when it is giving treatment. When the treatment has finished please remain in position until the radiographers enter the room and tell you everything is finished.

On average your appointment will last approximately 20 minutes however it may take longer at the beginning of your treatment or if a scan or X-ray is required.

Important advice during treatment

It is very important that you come for all your treatment appointments. Any missed treatments have the potential to reduce the success of radiotherapy. If for any reason you are unable to come for treatment, please inform us at the earliest opportunity. We may be able to make suggestions so that you can still come or will arrange for you to make up for missing the treatment.

Are there any side effects to having radiotherapy?

There are nearly always side effects to any treatment. Radiotherapy destroys cancer cells but can also temporarily affect healthy cells in the area of your body being treated.

General side effects

Please be aware that if you smoke or drink alcohol the side effects of treatment will be more severe. It is advisable to cut back or stop smoking and drinking altogether. If you feel you need support in doing this please talk to the radiographers.

Tiredness and fatigue: Tiredness can be a general side effect of treatment and travelling for treatment every day. A small number of patients describe feelings of extreme fatigue but most are able to continue with normal routines, and some continue to work.

People who have had chemotherapy before radiotherapy may notice the tiredness earlier because of the lasting effects of the chemotherapy. Try to rest when you can. Sometimes a small amount of gentle exercise can help.

The tiredness can continue after your treatment has finished and may last for a couple of months after.

Skin reactions: You may experience some skin reactions during and after treatment, please refer to the Skincare leaflet for further advice.

Loss of appetite: Some people find that radiotherapy may change their appetite. We can arrange to see a dietician if this applies to you. Eating little and often can help. If you are eating less than normal it is important to increase the calorie and protein content of any meal, these are suggestions which may help.

Full fat milk	Butter or margarine
Cream	Oil
Full fat yoghurt	Mayonnaise or salad cream
Ice cream	Evaporated milk
Cheese	

Nausea: Your Doctor or Consultant Radiographer will be able to give you anti-sickness tablets if this applies to you.

Hair loss: Depending on the position of your treatment, some people may experience some hair loss. Your hair may grow back or could be permanent. Your Doctor or Consultant Radiographer will be able to discuss this with you.

Site related side effects

Headaches: Some patients are troubled by this. Please let staff know if you experience any headaches.

Dizziness: You may have times when you feel light headed, try to rest and let the staff know.

Swelling: Medication and/or treatment may cause swelling to the head. Please inform the Radiographers if you are concerned.

Loss of taste: Loss of the sense of taste is very common if you are having your mouth treated. For the majority of patients it takes a few months for the sense to return. Foods that you may have enjoyed in the past may not taste the way they use to.

If your sense of taste starts to change try to:

- Avoid hot and spicy foods
- Serve foods chilled or at room temperature
- Marinate meat and fish in sweetened juices or sauces.

Voice and Breathing: If you are receiving treatment to your voice box (larynx), try to rest your voice as much as you can. Your larynx may become sore and your voice may become whispery or hoarse and your voice may even go.

This effect is temporary and your voice should return within a few weeks after completing your treatment. Sometimes the tissues in the voice box can swell, making breathing more difficult and noisy. If this does happen make sure you tell the radiographer or your Consultant.

Cough: Some patients develop a persistent cough during their treatment as a result of mucus (phlegm) build up. The build-up of mucus is a method by which the body protects itself. You are advised to drink water to help ease the cough. Do not try to force a cough.

If you are able, regular use of the mouthwashes as a rinse or gargle can help to ease the mucus build up.

Dryness of mouth: If the treatment field includes the salivary glands then your mouth may start to feel dry as the treatment stops the saliva production. Make sure you drink plenty of water and seek advice from the radiographer or your Consultant for a prescription of artificial saliva.

Over the course of your treatment your saliva might become thicker and change from clear to white, this reaction is normal. However if the colour of the saliva changes to yellow or light green please notify your radiographer or Consultant as you may need to be prescribed a course of antibiotics.

Staying well hydrated by maintaining 2 litres of daily fluid intake will help with loosening the build-up of mucus. Nebulisers, which send moist air through your air way may be beneficial. Please ask the Radiographers or your Key worker for information.

These side effects may last for several weeks after treatment has finished. Please ask the radiographers if you need help to cope with these side effects.

Ulcers: If you are receiving treatment to the tongue and the lining of the mouth or throat, this can take a long time to heal. Ulcers on the tongue or inside of the mouth can be painful for some time after treatment has finished.

Difficulty opening your mouth: Radiotherapy treatment may cause tightening of the muscles that open your mouth, making your jaw tighter and more difficult to open. This is called trismus. It is important that you practice the exercises that the Speech and Language therapists have given to you regularly throughout the day. It may be more comfortable to do these exercises taking pain killers.

Late or permanent reactions: It is possible that some types of reactions may occur after the treatment has finished. Your Doctor will discuss any possible late side effects at the time of consent and a radiographer will go through all side effects relating to your own individual treatment on your last day of treatment.

You will continue to be reviewed after radiotherapy has finished with your Key worker. Once they are happy with your progress you will be booked in for a follow up appointment with ENT or Maxillo-facial surgeons.

Weight loss: It may take a long time to get back to your normal weight after treatment, if you lose weight during treatment. If you are eating normally and your weight remains steady then this usually does not cause a problem.

Change in skin colour: Some patients experience a darkening of the skin in the treatment area. This will fade and return to normal over a couple of months. However, the change in your skin colour may be permanent.

Problems swallowing: Radiotherapy treatment can cause a tightening of the tissues in the throat making swallowing difficult. The skin of the neck can also become tighter and feel firmer to the touch due to scarring and oedema in the neck. If this problem continues for a long time ask your Doctor for advice.

Some questions you may have.....

Can I carry on working?

Although most people take time off during and for some time after treatment, you may carry on working during treatment if you wish to, as long as your Radiotherapy Doctor agrees. Please ask if you need advice.

What will happen after my treatment has finished?

Once you have completed your treatment your side effects may continue for two to three weeks and in some cases even worsen. It is important to continue with the advice that was given to you during your radiotherapy until the side effects minimise.

When can I go on holiday?

We do not recommend that you book a holiday for at least six to eight weeks after the radiotherapy has finished, please make sure you feel well enough to enjoy it and to check with your consultant before booking.

What should I do if I have any questions or concerns?

When treatment has ended please do not hesitate to contact the radiographers or specialist nurses for advice if you have any questions or worries about your treatment or recovery. The telephone numbers you need are included at the back of this leaflet.

What about follow up appointments?

You will either make a radiotherapy follow-up appointment on your last treatment day, or this will be sent in the post, this is normally 6-12 weeks after your treatment has ended.

Your appointment may be in the outpatient department at the Deanesly Centre or at a hospital nearer to where you live.

Further advice to help during and after your treatment

Skin care: During treatment and up to two weeks after treatment has finished it is advisable to wash gently with warm water and pat the skin dry with a soft towel. More information regarding this can be found in the skincare leaflet.

If your skin becomes blistered or broken during treatment, the radiotherapy team will monitor this and advise accordingly. If skin reactions occur after treatment has finished contact the hospital for advice but continue to follow the post treatment already given.

During treatment it is advisable to wear loose fitting comfortable clothes next to the treated area.

Keep the area being treated away from direct sunlight and heat such as sun lamps or hair-dryers. Remember your skin will become sensitive so extra care will be needed to look after it.

Nutritional advice: It is important to keep your weight stable leading up to and during your treatment. Eating small and frequent meals throughout the day will help.

A dietician will be available to give advice with problems such as difficulty swallowing, nausea or lack of appetite.

It is important to drink plenty of fluids during your treatment to stay hydrated.

Try to avoid very hot food and drink, allow food to cool slightly before eating and drinking and avoid spicy foods. Cool soft foods can help if your side effects are related to swallowing.

You may need nutritional supplement drinks if you are losing weight, having difficulty swallowing or not eating well due to lack of appetite or nausea. Please speak to a radiographer if you feel you are losing weight or struggling to eat.

Most patients having treatment to the head and neck will have a PEG (Percutaneous Endoscopic Gastrostomy) tube fitted.

This is an artificial tube that is placed into the stomach and by which you can be fed. Some patients start to use their peg from very early on in their treatment and some wait until they are unable to eat normally. Patients often find that for a few weeks they have to go on to a soft or liquidised diet and may need high calorie liquid food supplements. A referral to the dietitian will be made for you whilst you are having radiotherapy.

Mouth Care: Whilst on treatment good mouth care is advised as this will reduce chances of infections arising. It is common to develop a thrush infection in the mouth during radiotherapy. If you do so you will be given medication to combat this.

If you have your own teeth:

- Brush your teeth after every meal with a soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste
- Rinse your mouth with a warm salt solution (a cup of warm water with a teaspoon of salt)
- Do not use any other over the counter mouthwashes as they may be too harsh. Mouthwashes will be prescribed by your Consultant.

If you wear dentures:

- Make sure they are clean and fitting properly
- If your mouth is sore leave them out
- Use a foam stick and saline solution to gently clean around your mouth and gums after every meal.

Dental care after: Radiotherapy to the face or neck will affect the salivary glands and you may have a dry mouth after treatment. Saliva helps to protect the teeth from decay so following radiotherapy your teeth will be at greater risk.

It is important that you clean your teeth with a toothpaste containing fluoride after each meal to help protect your teeth from decay.

Radiotherapy also affects the bone of your jaw and may affect its ability to heal after injury.

Your teeth will be assessed before radiotherapy and any teeth in poor condition will be removed before the start of treatment to reduce the risk of the decay developing.

Please tell your dentist that you have had radiotherapy treatment to your mouth, as this may affect the care and treatment they recommend.

Useful telephone numbers

Monday to Friday – 9:00am – 5:00pm

Deanesly Reception Desk – 01902 694054

Oncology / Haematology

24 hour Patient Helpline Number 07920 587 036

Macmillan Support and Information Centre

You can find us on the main hospital corridor in New Cross Hospital or visit our website address below.

Telephone: 01902 695234

www.cancercarewolverhampton.nhs.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support

For more information on radiotherapy or to order your free booklet called 'Understanding Radiotherapy' ring Macmillan Cancer Support on Freephone 0808 808 0000

89 Albert Embankment

London

SE1 7UQ

www.macmillan.org.uk/cancerinformation/cancertypes/brainsecondary

This is a national charity, providing care and support for people living with cancer. Financial help may be available to some cancer patients.

Cancer Research UK

PO Box 123

London

WC2A 3PX

Freephone 0800 226 237

www.cancerresearchuk.org

English

If you need information in another way like easy read or a different language please let us know.

If you need an interpreter or assistance please let us know.

Lithuanian

Jeigu norėtumėte, kad informacija jums būtų pateikta kitu būdu, pavyzdžiui, supaprastinta forma ar kita kalba, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Jeigu jums reikia vertėjo ar kitos pagalbos, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Polish

Jeżeli chcieliby Państwo otrzymać te informacje w innej postaci, na przykład w wersji łatwej do czytania lub w innym języku, prosimy powiedzieć nam o tym.

Prosimy poinformować nas również, jeżeli potrzebowałiby Państwo usługi tłumaczenia ustnego lub innej pomocy.

Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ, ਜਿਵੇਂ ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਵਿਚ ਆਸਾਨ ਰੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ, ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਦੁਭਾਸ਼ੀਏ ਦੀ ਜਾਂ ਸਹਾਇਤਾ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

Romanian

Dacă aveți nevoie de informații în alt format, ca de exemplu caractere ușor de citit sau altă limbă, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Dacă aveți nevoie de un interpret sau de asistență, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Traditional Chinese

如果您需要以其他方式了解信息，如易读或其他语种，请告诉我们。

如果您需要口译人员或帮助，请告诉我们。