

Patient information factsheet

Colorectal radiotherapy

We have given you this factsheet because your doctors have recommended you have radiotherapy treatment for bowel cancer (sometimes called bowel or colon cancer). Radiotherapy involves the use of high-energy radiation and is commonly used to treat cancer. This factsheet explains what to expect at your radiotherapy treatment appointments. It aims to answer some of the initial questions you are likely to have. If you would like more information or have any concerns, please speak to a radiographer.

What to expect when you come for treatment

When you arrive in the radiotherapy department, check in at reception and take a seat in the waiting area.

It is important that your bladder is as comfortably full as it was when you came for your CT planning scan. This will make sure that the radiotherapy treatment is as accurate as possible. We will give you a specific quantity of fluid and a set amount of time in which to drink it, based on the information recorded at your planning scan. A radiographer will tell you when to start drinking.

If at any time you feel that you are struggling to hold your bladder or that you are not comfortably full, please tell the radiographers before they take you into the treatment room.

During your treatment

The radiographer may ask you to change into a hospital gown before you go into the treatment room. Changing facilities are available on every treatment machine.

When you go into the treatment room, the radiographer will ask you to confirm your name, date of birth and address. This will be repeated each time you attend for treatment. The radiographer will then put you into the correct position for treatment, using the reference marks made at your CT planning scan. These marks enable us to deliver your treatment accurately, so it's important that you stay still.

Radiotherapy treatment is painless and each session usually last for 10 to 15 minutes. Your radiographers will be able to answer any questions you may have about what to expect.

Alongside your treatment, you may be required to have blood tests or to see the doctor and/or a specialist radiographer on a regular basis. If this is the case we will discuss this with you.

Once your radiotherapy treatment is complete you are free to leave and continue the day as normal.

Side effects

Radiotherapy can cause side effects during and after your course of treatment. The radiographers will ask you how you are feeling every day. You can discuss any treatment related changes or concerns about side effects with them.

You may notice some or all of the following side effects during your second or third week of treatment.

Effects on the skin

Over time, the skin over the treatment area may become red and itchy. You should:

- treat the area gently
- avoid vigorous rubbing and instead pat skin dry with a soft towel
- avoid very hot or very cold water when you wash
- use your normal washing products (do not change brands or use a new product while you are having radiotherapy)
- moisturise sparingly with a moisturiser that you have used before
- wear loose fitting clothes made from natural fibres that will not irritate your skin
- avoid exposing the area to the sun or cold wind

Oesophagitis

Your oesophagus (gullet) may become inflamed and sore after having radiotherapy treatment. You may feel as if you have a “lump” in your throat or a burning sensation in your chest. You may also find swallowing uncomfortable.

You can help to reduce discomfort when you eat by:

- eating slowly and cutting your food into smaller pieces
- eating smaller meals more frequently instead of three larger meals
- eating softer foods that are easier to swallow
- increasing your intake of fluid and drinking through a straw to make swallowing easier
- avoiding crunchy foods that are more difficult to swallow
- avoiding hot and spicy foods
- avoiding alcohol and tobacco

If you continue to experience discomfort, your doctor may give you medication to make swallowing much easier. You will be weighed weekly to make sure you are not losing weight, and a dietitian will see you regularly throughout your course of treatment.

Effects on your bowels and back passage (rectum)

Your bowel habits may change. You may find that your stools become looser and more frequent or you may occasionally become constipated.

Your back passage (rectum) may become sore and irritated and you may notice blood on wiping. Please tell the radiographers if you use haemorrhoid products, as they may have to recommend an alternative.

Urinary effects

The frequency, urgency and flow of your urine may change as the treatment progresses. You may experience a stinging or burning sensation similar to cystitis when you urinate. If this happens, let your radiographer know. You may be asked to provide a urine sample so that we can check for infection.

Occasionally you may pass urine which appears cloudy or has blood in it. This is normal.

As your treatment progresses, you may find you are urinating more at night-time.

Tiredness (fatigue)

You may become more tired as your treatment progresses. Try to take a little light exercise and drink plenty of fluids to reduce your fatigue.

After radiotherapy

Side effects from your treatment will be at their worst around two weeks after your final radiotherapy session. They should then gradually settle over the next couple of months. Continue to follow the advice you have been given during your treatment. If you have made any dietary changes you can gradually reverse them.

You'll have a follow-up appointment with your doctor approximately six to eight weeks after you have finished your treatment.

Frequently asked questions

Will I be radioactive?

You will not be radioactive, so you are safe to be around family and friends.

Can I swim?

While we encourage physical exercise, swimming in chlorinated water can dry your skin out further. This may increase the likelihood of a skin reaction.

Can I continue with my normal activities after treatment?

Yes, within reason. You may have to make adjustments if you feel tired or unwell.

Will I feel anything as the treatment is happening?

No, the treatment is quick and painless.

Can I miss treatments?

We would advise that you do not miss a treatment once you have started. However, you may find gaps in your appointment schedule due to machine services or public holidays. The radiographers will work hard to minimise these gaps, and you may be asked to attend on a weekend or public holiday.

Useful information

Parking

Blue car park can be found outside the oncology centre, or by following signs to the eye unit. Parking spaces are limited, so please allow plenty of time to park.

Patients having radiotherapy treatment are entitled to a discount on parking. You must remember to validate your ticket at the radiotherapy reception before paying at the parking machine.

Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centre

The centre offers a range of services to support you and your family and carers. It is located on B level in the East Wing Courtyard at Southampton General Hospital.

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Opening hours are Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm. Drop-in sessions are available or you can book an appointment by calling: **023 8120 6037**.

Contact us

If you have urgent symptoms relating to your current radiotherapy treatment, please call the **acute oncology service** at Southampton General Hospital on: **023 8120 1345**.

This number is answered 24-hours, seven days a week. This number is for treatment-related symptoms only. It is not for general queries such as rearranging appointments or hospital transport. If your symptoms are not urgent, you can speak to one of the radiographers when you attend for your radiotherapy treatment.

In an emergency, call **999**.

For any non-urgent queries, please contact the radiotherapy reception.

Radiotherapy reception

Telephone: **023 8120 8568** (Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm)

Useful links

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/colon-and-rectal-colorectal

NHS Choices – Radiotherapy side effects

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Radiotherapy/Pages/Side-effects.aspx

Cancer Research UK

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/bowel-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy/radiotherapy-for-rectal-cancer

Contact the Cancer Research UK nurses on freephone **0808 800 4040** (9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday).

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