

Patient information factsheet

Radiotherapy to the oesophagus

We have given you this factsheet because your doctors have recommended you have radiotherapy treatment. 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 but if you would like more information or have any concerns, please speak to a radiographer who will be pleased to advise you.

Planning your treatment

Your first appointment will be the planning appointment. This includes a CT (computer tomography) scan of your chest in the treatment position. This CT scan is not a diagnostic scan but it is used by your radiotherapy doctor to produce an individual radiotherapy treatment plan for you.

We will ask you to lie on your back. We will place your hands above your head and support them there. It is very important that you let the staff scanning you know if you have any discomfort. The aim of the planning appointment is to find a position that is as comfortable as possible so that it can be held each time you come back for treatment.

A small monitoring device may also be placed on your chest. This is linked to the scanner. It will monitor your breathing throughout the scan so that we can see any changes in the tumour position during your breathing cycle. It is important that you are comfortable and that you are breathing normally. Please tell a member of the team if you are in any discomfort.

After the scan, the radiographers will mark three to four small dots that are permanent tattoos on your skin. These are essential so that we can reproduce your position when you have your treatment.

CT contrast scan

You may need a CT scan that requires an injection of contrast (a special dye). We will give you the contrast injection via a cannula (a thin plastic tube which goes into a vein in your arm). It is very important that you drink plenty of water up to 48 hours after this type of scan.

On the day of your radiotherapy appointment

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

The radiographer will ask you to change into a hospital gown before you go into the treatment room.

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Once you enter the treatment room, the radiographer will ask you to confirm your name, date of birth and address. This will happen each time you attend for treatment.

The radiographer will carefully put you into the right position for treatment, using both the reference marks that were applied at your CT planning scan and a specialist camera system which compares your current position with your position from your CT scan. This enables us to deliver your treatment accurately, so it's important that you stay still.

As well as your radiotherapy treatment, you may need to have blood tests or see a dietitian and/or doctor. Please check this with a radiographer before leaving the department after treatment.

Please allow up to two hours for these appointments.

Side effects

You may notice some side effects during your second or third week of radiotherapy.

You may experience some of the side effects outlined below. If you notice any changes or side effects during your treatment, please discuss them with the radiographers. They will be able to offer advice or reassurance and suggest ways to help you cope.

Tiredness (fatigue)

You may become more tired as your treatment progresses. Try doing gentle exercise and drink plenty of fluids to reduce your fatigue.

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
- avoiding crunchy foods that are more difficult to swallow
- increasing your intake of fluid and drinking through a straw to make swallowing easier
- avoiding hot and spicy foods
- avoiding alcohol and tobacco

If you continue to experience discomfort, you may be prescribed medication in order 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.

Nausea (feeling sick)

You may feel sick and lose your appetite. Try to eat little and often if you cannot manage large meals. Ginger products such as ginger beer or biscuits are often useful in reducing the feeling of sickness. Alternatively, a doctor can prescribe some anti-sickness medication.

Effects on the skin

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

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

Follow-up

A member of the oncology team will see you towards the end of your treatment. They will talk about the likely ongoing side effects and any plans for follow-ups after your radiotherapy treatment. We will give you any contact numbers that you may need.

Frequently asked questions

Will I be radioactive?

You will not be radioactive, so it is safe for you to be around family and friends.

Can I swim?

While we would normally encourage physical exercise, swimming in chlorinated water can dry your skin out further. This could cause a worse skin reaction.

Can I continue with my normal activities after treatment?

Yes. However, you may have to make adjustments if you start to feel tired or unwell.

Do I feel anything as the treatment is happening?

No, treatment is quick and painless.

Can I miss treatments?

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

Useful information

Parking

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

If you are having radiotherapy treatment, you 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 is located on B level in the East Wing courtyard. Opening hours are Monday to Friday from 10am to 4pm. Drop-in sessions are available or you can book an appointment on telephone: **023 8120 6037**.

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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, but is only for treatment-related symptoms. 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

NHS – Radiotherapy side effects:

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

Cancer Research UK – Radiotherapy for oesophageal cancer:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/oesophageal-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**

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