

Patient information factsheet

The voluntary breath-hold technique

This factsheet explains the breath-hold technique which, if you are able to, we may encourage you to use during your radiotherapy treatment appointments.

The technique involves you holding your breath for a short period of time (up to 20 seconds) at your radiotherapy CT scan appointment and during radiotherapy treatment.

Breathing in and holding your breath during treatment moves your heart away from the radiotherapy beam, and studies have shown that using this technique can reduce the dose of radiation to your heart during this kind of treatment. This technique also helps to keep you still during the treatment.

What happens during the CT planning scan?

When you come for your CT planning scan, we will show you the technique and ask you to try holding your breath for 5, 10, 15 and 20 seconds. If you find it comfortable and are able to hold your breath for 20 seconds or more, we will carry out a CT scan with you using the breath-hold technique.

You will then use the same technique during your radiotherapy treatment.

What happens if I'm unable to use the breath-hold technique?

If you're unable to hold your breath for at least 20 seconds, we will carry out a CT scan with you breathing normally. We can still plan your treatment accurately this way. You will have your treatment breathing normally.

What happens during radiotherapy treatment?

If you are able to hold your breath for 20 seconds, we will ask you to have your treatment using the breath-hold technique. You will be asked to hold your breath up to six to eight times during each radiotherapy treatment, though some of these breath-holds may be shorter than 20 seconds.

What are the possible side effects?

The breathing technique may feel a little uncomfortable at first and it may take some practice to get used to it - the radiographers in the CT scanner will help you with this. If at any time you wish to breathe normally, you can easily alert the radiographers by raising a hand.

Can I do anything to prepare?

Some patients find it helpful to practise holding their breath at home before their appointment. It is best to practise while lying on your back (as you will be on your back for the CT scan and your treatment), and increase the length of time you are comfortable holding your breath. Perhaps try 5 seconds first, then increase to 10, 15 and up to a maximum of 20 seconds.

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