Cancer Directorate (Radiotherapy)

Oesophageal radiotherapy – at the end of your treatment course

This leaflet provides information for patients who have finished their course of radiotherapy to the oesophagus. It is important that you look after yourself over the next few weeks during this period of recovery. If you have any questions or worries not covered here, please do not hesitate to call a member of your treatment team.

Side effects

By the end of a course of radiotherapy, many patients will have developed some side effects. It is quite normal for these to continue after your treatment has finished. In some cases they will become more severe before they get better. Typically your side effects, including tiredness and fatigue, will start to reduce after 10-14 days.

Below are some general guidelines we recommend you follow:

Fatigue

Fatigue is feeling extremely tired and it is very common in people with cancer. For some, fatigue lasts a long time after treatment. However, most patients start to see an improvement in the weeks to months following treatment.

- It can be hard to be active when you feel tired all the time. But being active can help to reduce fatigue; for example a short walk or some gentle gardening.
- It is important that you listen to your body and tailor your activities accordingly.
- Remember, it is fine to rest when you need to.

Pain or difficulty swallowing and eating

Radiotherapy can cause severe inflammation and soreness in the oesophagus.

- If you are still taking food by mouth, adopt a softer diet making good use of soups, gravies and sauces. Full fat milk, rice pudding, yogurts and ice-cream are good to try.
- Supplement drinks like Fortisip® can also help.
- Regular soluble paracetamol and Gaviscon®/Peptac® suspensions may help to reduce discomfort. These are available over the counter.
- Other prescription medications may be useful. Please contact a member of your team to discuss.
Reduced appetite
Your appetite may be lower than normal and you may have altered taste.
- Try eating small regular meals throughout the day.
- Stronger tasting foods may help with taste changes.
- Try to eat high calorie and nutritious foods.

Increase in secretions
You may notice an increase in clear secretions from the oesophagus. This is a normal side effect of radiotherapy. The secretions may be thicker than normal saliva and difficult to clear.
- Sip water throughout the day.
- Salt water rinses can be useful to keep the mouth clean.

Breathlessness and cough
Radiotherapy in the chest area may cause an irritating cough and mild shortness of breath due to its local inflammatory effect on lung tissue.
- Cool drinks, lozenges or simple cough linctus can help with a cough.
- Codeine or morphine drugs may help to suppress a cough, particularly if your sleep is being disrupted. Please contact your team to discuss.

Skin reaction
You may have a radiotherapy skin reaction. Red or itchy skin in the treated area may worsen over the next 14 days before it settles. Continue to bathe the area gently with tepid water and an unscented soap. Diprobase® or E45® can be used to moisturise the skin and reduce itching.

Follow-up clinic appointments
It is normal for patients to be followed up in the oncology clinic after a course of radiotherapy. The frequency of follow-up appointments will depend on you and the type of cancer you have been treated for. During your follow-up you might see a clinical nurse specialist, advanced practice radiographer or a doctor. In some circumstances, you may be offered a telephone appointment. If you are worried about any aspect of your recovery, please contact one of the team rather than wait until your next appointment.

Follow-up scans
We don’t tend to scan at the end of treatment to see if the radiotherapy has worked. This is because radiotherapy continues to have a beneficial effect on the tumour for some weeks afterwards. Radiotherapy also causes inflammation in the surrounding tissues meaning that scans at this time are not helpful. If a post treatment scan is required, then it would normally be performed three months after the completion of treatment. This will be discussed with you at your first follow-up appointment.
What about your emotional health?

Once your treatment ends you may find yourself filled with emotions and this happens to a lot of people. Your most recent focus has been getting through the treatment and now that it is finished you may have thoughts, emotions and feelings that can be overwhelming at times. This is a period when you might turn to people around you for strength and comfort. This support can come from family, friends, your treatment team, or cancer support centres.

Feedback

We welcome and value your feedback on our services. If you would like to make any comments about your treatment, or feel we can improve the service, please fill in a comment card which can be found in a box on the wall at Radiotherapy Reception.
Sources of further information and support

The Macmillan Pod at Addenbrooke’s offers support, advice and information for anyone affected by cancer. It is located in Oncology, Level Two. They offer assistance with blue badge and Macmillan grant applications, and help with referrals and signposting to benefits advice.

The service will also help find local support groups and self-management courses. Drop by Monday to Friday for more information or to speak with an information specialist.

Telephone: 01223 274 801
Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

The Oesophageal Patients Association offers support and information to patients and families affected by oesophageal and gastric cancers. They provide medically approved information booklets, hold support group meetings and run a telephone helpline (Monday to Friday, 09:00-15:00).

Telephone: 01217 049 860
Website: www.opa.org.uk

Maggie’s Wallace is located in the grounds of Addenbrooke’s hospital and provides free practical, emotional and social support for people with cancer and their family and friends. Their programme of support includes clinical psychology, nutrition, benefits advice and exercise, courses pre and post treatment and complementary treatments.

Cancer support specialists are on hand Monday to Friday, 09:00-17:00. No appointment required.

Telephone: 01223 249 220
Website: www.maggiescentres.org
Address: 21 Milton House, Puddicombe Way, Cambridge, CB2 0AD
We are now a smoke-free site: smoking will not be allowed anywhere on the hospital site. For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS stop smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169.

Other formats:

If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio, please ask the department where you are being treated, to contact the patient information team: patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk.

Please note: We do not currently hold many leaflets in other languages; written translation requests are funded and agreed by the department who has authored the leaflet.

Document history
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