Cancer Division
Radiotherapy

Short course radiotherapy for cancer of the oesophagus

This leaflet contains information and advice to help you look after yourself during and after your radiotherapy treatment. It covers the commonly seen side effects of treatment, but this doesn’t mean that you will definitely get them. It is also possible that you may get a side effect not mentioned here.

If you have any questions or concerns about the information given to you, or any aspect of your treatment, please speak to a member of the radiotherapy team.

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy uses carefully measured doses of strong x-rays to treat diseases. It is usually given in small doses over a number of weeks and works by causing damage to cells within the body. Cancer cells are much less able than normal cells to repair this damage, so more of the cancer cells will be destroyed. The aim of the radiotherapy is to control the cancer and ease the symptoms that it is causing.

How is the treatment planned?

Radiotherapy treatment is tailored to the individual patient and requires careful planning. The first appointment involves having a CT scan in the radiotherapy department where tiny permanent marks (referred to as tattoos), are made on your skin. These are important reference marks used by the radiographers to accurately deliver your treatment.

The radiographers will also take your photograph, which is used as a safety check each day prior to your treatment. The specialist cancer doctor (oncologist) will use these CT images to decide upon the area requiring treatment.
What happens during treatment?

On the first day of treatment, a member of the treatment team will have a chat with you to explain how the radiotherapy is delivered. They will also check that you are happy to go ahead with your treatment and this is the ideal opportunity to ask any questions that you might have. A team of doctors, radiographers, nurses, and dieticians will care for you throughout the course of your treatment.

The radiotherapy machines are quite large but they don’t actually touch you. Each treatment session takes about 10 minutes. Once you are correctly positioned on the treatment couch, the radiographers operate the machines from outside of the room. A closed circuit television camera allows the radiographers to monitor you throughout. They can also talk to you through an intercom. The machines make a buzzing sound when giving the radiotherapy, but it is completely painless and only lasts a few minutes.

You will not be radioactive afterwards and are safe to mix with other people including children and pregnant women.

How many treatments will I have?

A number of factors affect the total number of radiotherapy treatments. Generally treatment is delivered daily Monday to Friday and patients typically have between 5 and 10 treatments. Your oncologist will confirm the most appropriate treatment schedule with you.

How are treatment appointments arranged?

We will accommodate your time preference wherever possible. Please try to be as flexible as you can and give priority to your treatment sessions over other general appointments. The time may vary slightly each day due to the number of patients on the unit.

You will see one of the treatment team in the radiotherapy review clinic once a week to see how you are and manage any side effects that you might be experiencing. If you would like to be seen by one of the team at any point during your treatment, just ask one of the treatment radiographers.
What are the side effects of treatment?

Some of the commonly seen side effects of radiotherapy are listed below, but even these can vary between people depending on the area being treated and the radiation dose required. Side effects tend to appear within 1-2 weeks. They continue for a couple of weeks after the treatment has finished before gradually settling.

Tiredness

Tiredness is one of the most common side effects of radiotherapy. Listen to your body. You may need to rest and relax more than usual, particularly if you are travelling long distances to the hospital. However, it is good to maintain a level of activity such as gentle walking, if you feel able. Don’t be afraid to ask friends and family for help.

Difficulty in swallowing

Radiotherapy can irritate the lining of the oesophagus. You may feel as though you have a lump in your throat or notice soreness when you swallow.

- You may need to adopt a softer diet temporarily, making good use of gravies and sauces. Cool drinks and ice cream may help. It is advisable to avoid spicy, scratchy or stodgy foods, hot drinks, and strong alcoholic drinks.
- We can prescribe medication to reduce the soreness when you swallow:
  - Lidocaine and hydrocortisone mucilage – a liquid that you swallow to reduce pain and inflammation
  - Gaviscon – A liquid that you swallow to coat the lining of the oesophagus
  - Soluable or liquid pain relief e.g. paracetamol or morphine
- Nutritionists are on hand to help you maintain adequate nutritional intake. You may already have a feeding tube in place if swallowing is troublesome.

Shortness of breath

Radiotherapy can make you feel more breathless and give you an irritable cough. This is due to temporary inflammation in the lungs. Occasionally we need to prescribe some medication for this.

Nausea or vomiting

Nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting (being sick) is less common, but may happen if the treatment includes the lower part of your oesophagus. It can be controlled with effective anti-sickness drugs.

Loss of appetite

If you are able to swallow food/drink, you may feel less like doing so when you have radiotherapy. It is desirable to keep your weight stable during treatment. Try to eat high calorie small meals and snacks regularly throughout the day. Drink plenty of fluids to stay well hydrated. Nutritional supplements and fortified drinks can also help.
**Skin reaction**
Radiotherapy will only affect your skin within the treated area. You may notice that the skin here becomes more sensitive, slightly red, warm, itchy or dry. This often occurs in the second half of the treatment course.

We advise you to:

- Wash daily with a mild soap and warm water and pat dry with a soft towel.
- Apply a gentle moisturiser to the treated area up to twice daily e.g. E45 or Diprobase®.
- Deodorant may be used.
- Try to avoid sun exposure on the treated area where possible, and for about one year after treatment.
- Swimming in chlorinated pools is permitted, but rinse skin well with water afterwards and stop if irritation occurs.
- For male patients – radiotherapy can cause the chest hair to fall out. This normally regrows a few months after treatment has finished. Hair on the head is not affected by radiotherapy to the oesophagus however some chemotherapy drugs do cause hair loss and the chemotherapy nurses will advise you.

**After treatment ends**
Radiotherapy can continue to have a beneficial effect on the tumour for some weeks after the completion of treatment. The side effects persist for up to 2 weeks before they start to settle down. It can take 4-6 weeks for them to settle completely.

**Contacts**
If you have any worries or questions about any aspect of your treatment, please do not hesitate to contact one of the team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Contact Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rachel Kirby</strong></td>
<td>Direct line: 01223  596 199</td>
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<td>Macmillan Advanced Practitioner Thoracic Oncology</td>
<td>Bleep: 154-626 via 01223 245 151</td>
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<td><strong>Ben Smith</strong></td>
<td>Direct Line: 01223  596 383</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clinical Nurse Specialist Upper GI Cancer</td>
<td>Bleep via hospital reception 01223 245 151</td>
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<td><strong>Radiotherapy Reception</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Chemotherapy Day Unit</strong></td>
<td>01223 217 099</td>
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<td><strong>Oncology Reception</strong></td>
<td>01223 216 551 / 216 552</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emergency 24 hour helpline for oncology patients</strong></td>
<td>01223 274 224</td>
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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 2. 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 to pick up information or to speak with an information specialist.

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

The oesophageal patients Association offer 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-Friday 9am-3pm).

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, 9am-5pm. No appointment required.

Phone: 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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