

Information for Patients

Information for patients receiving radiotherapy for head and neck cancer



Introduction

This pack has been put together to back up the information and advice already passed onto you by your Consultant Oncologist.

You may wish to share it with your family and friends, so that they can understand a little more about your treatment.

More advice/information is available from the Head & Neck team including your Head and Neck Cancer Nurse Specialist or the radiographers during your radiotherapy treatment. Other staff that can help include dietician, speech and language therapist as well as the chemotherapy team should you be having chemotherapy.

[For patient information video click here](#)

Radiotherapy

Your Doctor has recommended that you receive a course of radiotherapy. This pack will help to answer some of your questions.

What is Radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy treats cancer using high energy X rays to destroy the cancer cells, whilst causing the minimum amount of damage to normal cells

Your radiotherapy will be very carefully planned using a plastic shell which you will wear during your treatment. Some patients are also required to wear a dental mouth-bite whilst being treated. The Consultant will make you aware of what is required at your Clinic appointment. Your treatment will be given by a team of male and female radiographers, who will help and support you if you have any

problems. The Review Radiographer will also see you on a weekly basis to assess your side effects and offer advice.

How is it given?

You will receive the treatment over a number of weeks, usually as an out-patient, on a daily basis, Monday to Friday, with a rest at weekends. If treatment falls around bank holidays then you may be required to attend for treatment on a Saturday, Sunday or the bank holiday.

What will I feel?

During your treatment you will not feel anything, or see anything. The actual treatment machine makes a high-pitched noise, and the treatment lasts for only a few minutes at each visit.

Will I experience any side effects?

You may get some side effects towards the end of your course of treatment; see separate section for skin care and side effects. You will be seen regularly by the Head & Neck team, Review Radiographer during your treatment and by the radiographers who will give you advice and support on a daily basis.

Will I be radioactive?

You will not be radioactive, and it is safe for you to be around other people and children.

How do I get to the hospital?

Friends and family often like to help.

If there is a medical reason, then the hospital can arrange transport for you.

At the end of your radiotherapy

A follow up appointment will be sent to you.

Preparation for Treatment to the Head & Neck with a Shell

Radiotherapy is a very accurate treatment and to achieve the best results you will need to lie very still. This is especially important for areas of the head and neck. To help you to keep your head still we will make you a "Vac-bag" as well as a "shell" which you will wear each time you attend for treatment.

What is a Vac-bag?

A Vac-bag is a piece of equipment that is like a bean bag that has the air removed so that it can be moulded to the shape of your neck and head to support you while your shell is on. The Vac-bag will be made for you to lie on while the shell is on you for each day of your treatment.

What is a Shell?

The shell is made from a plastic material and will cover the part of your body being treated and the surrounding area. The shell is covered in tiny holes so you will be able to breathe through your nose at all times.

How is the Shell made?

The shell starts off as a flat piece of plastic. The plastic sheet is put in a bath of warm water for a few minutes where it softens. The plastic sheet is then dried and smoothed over your face to fit your shape. The plastic cools after a few minutes and keeps the shape of your head and face.

Does it hurt?

NO. The plastic is warm when you feel it laid over your face but cools very quickly.

How long does it take?

The plastic sheet takes 15 minutes to cool from when it comes out of the water until it is firm and we can remove it. During the 15 minutes setting time the radiographers will continue with the preparations and the CT scan to reduce the time that you are required to stay in the shell.

What do you have to do?

If you have a beard or moustache it would be good to shave it off before having the shell made. This is not compulsory. If you do not wish to remove any hair it is important that it remains the same length throughout the treatment.

What happens next?

Once the shell is made you will then have a CT scan wearing the shell. The information from the scan is used to plan your treatment.

Contrast

You may need an injection of dye (intravenous contrast) into your hand or arm during the planning scan. If you need intravenous contrast we will require you to have a blood test a few days before your CT (planning) scan, so all the relevant checks can be carried out.

At the end of your planning scan, you may be given a permanent ink (tattoo) dot on your chest under the skin in the most suitable area of your body. This mark will not come off but may fade slightly with time. The permanent mark is used to position you accurately for treatment each day. It may also be necessary to take photographs of your position on the couch to assist the radiographers at treatment.

Mouth-bites

Some patients need a mouth bite; it will depend on the area being treated. The mouth-bite is to keep your tongue in the right

position and mouth open. This may need to be made before we make the shell. If this is the case two 1-hour appointments will be made in Clinic 7 at RSH on your behalf. The initial visit will be for dental impressions. This is a similar procedure to having an impression done for dentures at your dentist. The second appointment, one week later, is to have the mouth- bite fitted.

You will be given your treatment start date and time before you leave the department following your planning scan. If you have any appointments that may clash with your radiotherapy treatment please advise the radiographers when you attend for your CT (planning) scan as we **may** be able to alter your appointment

Treatment planning

It may take a couple of weeks to plan and check your treatment. You will be given an appointment to attend the Lingen Davies centre on a Friday prior to starting your treatment to check the shell is fitting.

Side Effects

It is important to remember that everyone is different, and the way you react to radiotherapy may be different to somebody else. The following advice may help you to lessen the side effects of radiotherapy, or at least to cope with them more easily. If you have any side effects described below or any other problems, please inform the treatment radiographers.

Sore mouth/throat.

If the radiotherapy is treating your mouth or throat you may get a dry or sore mouth. You will be seen regularly by the Dental Hygienist who will advise you about taste changes and looking after your mouth.

Skin care and reactions.

1. You should treat your skin in the treatment area gently. Wash with soap and water and gently pat the area dry using a soft towel. Do not rub.
2. Use a moisturiser, gently smooth it on and apply in the direction of hair growth
3. Avoid products on your skin that contain alcohol, such as aftershaves, perfumes, and hair dyes
4. As you progress through your treatment, the skin in the area being treated may become slightly red and may darken towards the end of your treatment. The skin may even blister or break. The radiographers will give you advice about care of your skin if this happens.
5. Gentlemen: You may use an electric razor gently
6. Protect your skin from the sun or cold winds during and after treatment. The treated area will always be more sensitive to sun and should be protected from sun light for several years after your radiotherapy using a high factor sun block, UV protective clothing or by sitting in the shade.
7. We do not recommend taking holidays in hot climates for at least six months after completion of your radiotherapy.
8. Wear loose clothing around the treatment area.

Tiredness

As your treatment progresses you may feel more tired. This is normal. Keeping as hydrated as possible by drinking water or fruit juices will help you feel less tired. Listen to how tired your body feels and rest when required. You do not need to give up gentle exercise.

Nausea

Please drink more fluids – water or squash (not alcohol) during your radiotherapy treatment, as this will reduce any feeling of sickness. If you are still feeling sick, please let the radiographers know.

Eating

1. Do not eat food that is too hot, too cold, or spicy. Soft food will be easier to swallow. It is important to maintain a healthy, balanced diet.
2. You may find difficulty in eating and swallowing towards the end of your treatment. You will be seen regularly by the Dietician who will advise you. You may lose your taste, or you may taste a metal taste in your mouth. Your mouth may become dry, as your saliva is reduced by the treatment.
3. Some patients may require more help with feeding right from the start of treatment, you will see the dietician regularly and she/ he will advise you if this is necessary.

Specific Tips to Help Eating/Drinking

1. Sit upright, preferably in a chair at a table, eating and drinking lying down is a difficult process.
2. Swallow twice for each bite/sip (or as needed) to completely clear the mouth and throat of residue.
3. Mixed consistencies e.g. soup with bits are the most tricky to swallow. Single texture foods e.g. mashed potato and custard are easier.
4. Tablets are often hard to swallow. Taking them with soft food e.g. yoghurt/apple sauce is often easier than with fluids. Ask your Doctor whether any can be transferred into syrup form or whether the tablets are suitable for crushing
5. Using straws/spouted beakers usually is more difficult to control
6. Eat small frequent meals and avoid eating just before going to bed
7. If it is painful to swallow make sure you have had painkillers before eating giving them time to work.
8. Remain upright for at least 30 minutes after eating to ensure that food and drink does not come back in the throat

You may be required to have a feeding tube (PEG) placed in your stomach as part of the planning for your treatment. The feeding tube is to help maintain your weight during the later stages of your radiotherapy. Not All patients need a feeding tube; your consultant will discuss this with you if it is appropriate to you.

Dental Hygiene

The Dental Hygienist will see you regularly, to assist with your oral hygiene and mouth care prior to, during and on completion of treatment.

Dry mouth

Your salivary glands may not return to normal function. You may need to drink more fluids with meals to help you chew and swallow, or use artificial saliva products if necessary.

You will have a higher risk of dental caries and gum disease therefore it is important that you follow the advice given to you by the Dental Hygienist before, during and after you radiotherapy. If you wear dentures it is important that they do not rub. You should visit your own dentist regularly. Your taste for food may recover slowly.

Alcohol.

Alcohol will make your side effects worse.

Smoking.

Smoking will also make your mouth and throat sore. There is information, advice and support on quitting which can be made available to you.

Hair loss.

You may lose the hair in the area that is being treated, and this may be permanent (depending on the amount of radiation the doctor has prescribed for you). Hair may also be lost on the opposite side. This will have been discussed with you prior to radiotherapy. We have the facility to enable you to have a wig made if necessary.

Hearing

If the radiotherapy treated your ears, you may get some hearing loss, or experience glue ear symptoms, which should lessen with time, and can be easily treated.

Follow-up

When you have finished your course of radiotherapy you will continue to be seen regularly by the Head and Neck team in clinic, and your first follow-up appointment will be about 6 weeks following your radiotherapy. This is to assess any side effects from radiotherapy.

You will be followed up regularly by phone by the Head and Neck Nurses, Speech and Language Therapist, Dietician and Dental Hygienist.

Gradually the length of time between your clinic visits will increase. However if you develop a problem between visit you can always contact the Head and Neck Cancer Nurse Specialist on 01743 261000 ext. 3902

Role of the Dental Hygienist

An examination of your teeth and gums is essential prior to starting your radiotherapy. This is to assess if any treatment is necessary before you begin your treatment and also to show you how to begin to care for your mouth during the course of your radiotherapy and afterwards. If you need any dental extractions, they will be done prior to having the shell made. The Oral and Maxillofacial doctor will carry out this initial assessment. The Dental Hygienist will also see you by arrangement during your radiotherapy and afterwards as necessary.

The dental hygienist is based in the Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery & Orthodontics. Clinic 7. Tel 01743 261135

Oral Complications

Sore mouth - The side effects of radiotherapy may make your mouth feel extremely uncomfortable, you may experience moderate to severe pain, inflammation, swelling and ulceration of the lining of your mouth and /or throat. We can recommend a mouthwash that you can use.

Dentures - Lack of saliva may make wearing dentures uncomfortable. Do clean them regularly, especially after each meal and at night. Leaving your dentures out during radiotherapy can make them difficult to fit when needed.

Dry Mouth - You may develop a dry mouth because the flow of your saliva has reduced, this can make chewing and swallowing difficult. Eat moist food, and sip water regularly. Saliva substitutes will be prescribed for you when needed. Chewing sugar-free gum helps some people.

General advice to help you cope with your treatment.

1. Clean your teeth gently, but thoroughly using a soft toothbrush and mild flavoured fluoride toothpaste. If you are having chemotherapy as well, it is suggested that you change your toothbrush prior to each session of chemotherapy.
2. If you have pain in your mouth tell us, we will try to help you feel more comfortable with the use of an appropriate painkiller. Take it as recommended to you by the Doctor or Nurse.
3. If you smoke – try to stop or at least cut down, as the tobacco will irritate the lining of your mouth and throat.
4. Avoid alcohol, particularly spirits, as they will sting your mouth and throat.
5. Avoid spicy foods, fruit juices or fizzy drinks
6. Avoid very hot or very cold food or drinks
7. Do drink lots of fluids, preferably water to help to keep your mouth moist, to make swallowing easier and to generally make you feel more comfortable.

8. Artificial saliva may be useful during the day and you can moisten your mouth with a little flavourless vegetable oil before going to bed.

3,4,5,and 6 may increase the severity of the reaction that you may experience in your mouth

The Role of the Speech & Language Therapist

The Speech & Language Therapist aims to help people achieve the best speech, voice and swallowing skills possible in all settings. This can be at any stage during a person's treatment.

Speech

1. Communication is an essential part of everyday life and difficulties can lead to feelings of social isolation and depression. There are many ways to help this, including the loan of communication aids, on a long or short-term basis, e.g. an amplifier to project your voice.
2. Radiotherapy may cause changes to your voice:
 - Deeper pitch
 - Hoarse sound
 - Loss of voice or a weak voice

These changes are usually short lived during the period of treatment and maximum side effects. By 3-6 months post-treatment a stronger voice is usually heard.

How can you help yourself?

Generally

- Avoid unnecessary use of the voice, resting it when tired or painful
- Stop smoking
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Take time to pause and relax

Prevention of Voice problems & Care of the Voice

Please avoid:

1. Straining your throat/voice by:

- Shouting or screaming
- Forcing your voice out to get sound or volume when speaking or singing
- Continuing to use your voice when it hurts
- Using a forced whisper
- Excessive coughing or throat clearing

2. Irritants to the throat, such as:

- Smoking
- Smoky/dusty/dry atmospheres
- Chemical fumes
- Sugared or acidic sweets

3. Allowing your throat to dry out by:

- Drinking tea/coffee/cola excessively (due to caffeine content)
- Drinking alcohol excessively (spirits are most dehydrating)
- Eating overly spiced foods

Instead:

1. Use your voice without strain by:

- 1 Talking calmly and slowly
- 2 Breathing easily and regularly
- 3 Reducing background noise, e.g. talking over the vacuum cleaner, TV etc
- 4 Talking face-to-face over a short distance
- 5 Instead of throat clearing/coughing, try an alternative e.g. swallowing hard, sip cold water, silent pause

2. Keep your throat comfortable by:

- 1 Drink plenty of cool, clear fluids (minimum of 2 litres per day)
- 2 Keep air humid e.g. humidifier, bowls of water
- 3 To relieve soreness, suck sugarless lozenges, chew sugarless gum, inhale steam, sip hot lemon with honey

Swallowing Problems

Swallowing problems may occur if you are having radiotherapy to your neck or throat, this is because of swelling and discomfort caused by radiotherapy. The Speech and Language Therapist will offer you advice on how to cope with this difficulty.

If you wish to see a Speech & Language Therapist, ask to be referred to the Macmillan Speech & Language Therapist.

Contact Numbers

Consultant Clinical Oncologists Telephone: 01743 261656

Head and Neck Cancer Nurse Specialist

Telephone: 01743 261000 ext 3902 or via Hospital Switchboard on bleep 963

Dental Hygienist Telephone: 01743 261135

Therapeutic Radiographers Telephone: 01743 261179

Macmillan Speech and Language Therapist

Telephone: 01743 261676

Dietician Telephone: 01743 261676

Ward 23, Royal Shrewsbury Hospital

Telephone: 01743 261423

Ward 17, Head and Neck, Princess Royal Hospital, Telford 01952 641222 ext 4730/4655

Hamar Help and Support Centre Telephone: 01743 261035

Macmillan Information & Support Service

Telephone: 01743 261000 ext 1957

Further information is available from:



Feedback

We appreciate and encourage feedback which can be shared in a number of ways through the hospital website. Scan the QR code to give feedback. <https://www.sath.nhs.uk/patients-visitors/feedback/>

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS will act on your behalf when handling patient and family concerns, they can also help you get support from other local or national agencies. PALS, is a confidential service.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Tel: 0800 783 0057 or 01743 261691

Princess Royal Hospital, Tel: 01952 282888

Other Sources of Information

NHS 111

A fast and easy way to get the right help, whatever the time. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

111 (free from a landline or mobile)

www.nhs.uk

Self Help & Support Groups

A selection of websites providing access to good quality health information, local organisations and community groups is available from the library. www.library.sath.nhs.uk/find/patients/

Information in Other Languages or Formats

If you require this information in a different way such as easy read, a different language, larger print, audio or braille please tell a member of staff or contact the Patient Experience Team;

sath.patientexperience@nhs.net or 01743 261000 ext. 2503.

Website: www.sath.nhs.uk

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