Radiotherapy for Malignant Spinal Cord Compression (MSCC)

Information for patients
This leaflet aims to help you and your family understand more about your radiotherapy treatment.

This leaflet will be given to you in addition to the information you will receive from your clinical oncologist (a specialist doctor in cancer treatment). Their team will be caring for you during your treatment. This team may include radiographers, nurses, social workers, physiotherapists and occupational therapists may also be involved in your care.

The healthcare team looking after you will explain your treatment and the side-effects in detail. If you hear any words or phrases that you do not understand, please ask your doctor or a member of your healthcare team what it means. It does not matter how many times you ask.

Staff will make every effort to meet your individual needs or will direct you to the person who can help.

All your radiotherapy planning and treatment will take place in the Radiotherapy Department on Level -2, Bexley Wing, Leeds Cancer Centre (LS9 7TF).

Please do not bring any valuables into hospital with you as the Trust cannot accept liability for loss or theft.
What is MSCC?
The spinal cord is the chain of nerves that sits within the backbone (spine/vertebrae). The nerves for all parts of the body, including the legs, arms, bladder and bowel branch from the spinal cord.

MSCC happens when cancer grows in or near the spine and presses on the spinal cord and nerves. This can result in muscle weakness, altered sensation, bladder and bowel disturbance. Your doctor is concerned that you have MSCC or are at risk of developing this condition. Radiotherapy treatment is recommended for this.

What is radiotherapy?
Radiotherapy is the use of high energy X-rays to treat cancer. The organs and tissues of the body are made up of tiny building blocks called cells. Radiotherapy causes physical and chemical damage to the cancer cells in the treated area. Although normal cells are also affected, they can repair themselves and are able to recover. When you are having your radiotherapy you do not feel anything and it does not make you radioactive. You will have your treatment on a machine called a Linear Accelerator.

Radiotherapy is given by male and female therapy Radiographers. Your radiographers will be happy to answer any questions you may have.
Students
The radiotherapy department is a training centre for male and female radiographers. They are supervised at all times. If you do not wish students to be present please speak to a member of staff. This will not affect your treatment or care.

Pregnancy
Radiotherapy can be harmful if given during pregnancy. If you are a woman of child bearing age you will be asked to confirm that you are not pregnant at the time of your scan and treatment.

What to bring with you
- a list of all the questions you may have;
- any medication that you may need during your visit;
- something to eat and drink and something to occupy yourself with (you may be with us for up to six hours).

Planning Your Treatment

Mould Room: If your cord compression is in the top of your spine a radiotherapy mask may be made to ensure you stay still during your treatment.

Your Planning Scan
In order to plan your treatment you will have a planning CT scan. This allows the images to be sent to the radiotherapy computer planning system.
The scan will only take a few minutes, and it is important for you to stay as still as you can. This scan is not used for diagnostic purposes and will not be reported on.

The scan will be taken with you lying in the same position as you will be in for your treatment. The radiographers will draw a mark onto your mask or skin, to be used as a reference for your treatment. This mark will then be replaced by a small permanent mark. If you have had radiotherapy before, your previous permanent marks may be used instead.

It is perfectly safe for you to be with other people, including children, throughout your treatment.

**Having your treatment**

Radiotherapy may be given as a single treatment or as a course of up to 10 treatments.

You will usually have treatment on the same day as your planning scan. There is a break in between the planning scan and your treatment. This is to enable us to plan your treatment accurately and safely. Whilst we are planning your treatment, you may spend some time on a ward where the nursing team can assist you. Depending on your needs, you may be able to stay in our department.
When it is time for you to have your treatment, the radiographers will position you on the treatment couch in the same position as you were in for your planning scan.

You will be asked to stay as still as possible during your treatment, but you should breathe and swallow normally.

The radiographers will leave the room to switch on the machine, but are watching you on a closed circuit TV (CCTV) monitor. The CCTV camera is not recording or saving any images. There is also an intercom system so the radiographers can talk to you.

Each radiotherapy treatment room is fitted with an alert system. If you need assistance at any point during your treatment press the button and the radiographers will come straight back in to you.
Side-effects of Radiotherapy

General side-effects

*Tiredness (fatigue)*
Radiotherapy can make you feel more tired than usual, especially if you have to travel a long way for treatment.

*Pain*
You may experience increased pain called a ‘pain flare’, soon after treatment. You should continue to take any medication you are taking for pain relief. Occasionally this may need to be increased for a short period and you should contact your GP, District Nurse or Macmillan Nurse to arrange this.

You may find your pain improves within days of treatment but it may several weeks to feel the benefits of treatment.

*Skin Reaction*
The skin where you are having your treatment may become pink and itchy quite soon after treatment. You will be given a leaflet which will give you more information about this and how to care for your skin after your radiotherapy. If you are concerned about your skin reaction please talk to your radiographers or contact the nursing staff in Review Clinic on 0113 206 7587.

Site specific side effects (depending on where you are being treated)

*Sore mouth*
Treatment of your neck area can cause inflammation of your mouth which can be sore. You can take painkillers as need be and avoid very hot/cold/spicy food and drink for a few days.
**Difficulty Swallowing**
Treatment to the upper spine (neck and chest) may inflame your gullet and could cause some temporary soreness when you swallow.

**Nausea and Vomiting**
This can occur when having the lower part of your spine treated. This can often be prevented by an anti-sickness tablet taken before you have your treatment and your doctor will prescribe this if you are at risk.

**Cough**
Treatment to the upper spine may cause a temporary cough.

**Diarrhoea**
Treatment involving your tummy can cause temporary diarrhoea. Painkillers and some anti sickness medication can help this. Over the counter medication such as Imodium (loperamide) can be taken as instructed on the box.

**Cystitis**
This feels similar to a bladder infection and is temporary. Painkiller/anti inflammatories can be taken if required.

**What will happen after my radiotherapy?**
The Physiotherapist may work with you in setting goals to help you become as independent as possible.

The Occupational Therapists and Medical Social Workers will help you and your family/carer plan your future care. This may include information on any benefits you may be entitled to and any help and equipment you may need at home.
Your ongoing care and discharge plans may continue at a hospital nearer to your home, where planning about your future care will continue. You may have an appointment with your oncologist 4-6 weeks after finishing treatment.

**What can I expect?**
The aim of radiotherapy is to help control your symptoms and aims to prevent further deterioration in your neurological (nerve) symptoms. MSCC affects each patient differently. Your recovery following radiotherapy will depend on your level of fitness before MSCC. However many people need some level of assistance with mobility after treatment. Your healthcare team aims to help you become as independent as possible and will discuss this with you.

**Could MSCC happen again?**
Unfortunately, for some patients, MSCC can occur again affecting a different part of the spine. If your symptoms return, or worsen, you will need to contact us immediately.

It may be appropriate for you to have further radiotherapy.

**Contact:**
- Your oncology wards emergency contact number.
- If you are a Leeds patient - the Oncology bleepholder Tel: **0113 243 3144** - ask for the Oncology Patient Bleepholder.
- Out of Hours GP
- Emergency Department - please take this leaflet with you.
Further support

If the information in this leaflet has caused you any anxiety you may want to speak to somebody about this. This could be your Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) or Key Worker or you can contact any of the support services listed below. The Palliative Care Team, CNS or Key Worker details are for non-urgent advice and support.

The Sir Robert Ogden Macmillan Centre
The Robert Ogden Centre provides an environment where patients and their families can drop in for a drink, take some time out, or just a chat. The centre also offers a variety of support services including counselling, support groups and complementary therapies.

Contact: The Sir Robert Ogden Macmillan Centre, St James’s University Hospital Beckett Street, Leeds LS9 7TF
Tel: 0113 206 6498
or email: leedsth-tr.Cancersupport@nhs.net

Community Palliative Care Team at St Gemma’s Hospice
Tel: 0113 218 5500

Community Palliative Care Team at Wheatfields Hospice
Tel: 0113 278 7249

Chaplaincy
A chaplain is available for patients who need support, to answer questions about faith, or simply need to talk to someone about the experience of being in hospital. Chaplains are available from a number of church and faith traditions and are supported by a team of volunteers.
You can see a chaplain at any time, ask a member of staff to contact the Chaplaincy Team.

The Faith Centre is based on Level 1, Bexley Wing and is open 24 hours a day. There is a Multi-Faith Prayer Room where regular services are held. Messages for the Chaplains can be left at the Faith Centre, or by calling 0113 206 4365.

**Macmillan Cancer Support**
Freephone 0808 808 0000, 9am to 6pm Mon - Fri.
A textphone service for deaf and hard of hearing people on 18001 0808 808 0000
website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)