Short course radiotherapy to the head and neck

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

It will be given to you in addition to the information you will receive from your clinical oncologist (who is 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, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and dietitians.

The leaflet describes radiotherapy planning and treatment. It also explains the side-effects which you may experience during and after treatment.

Each person’s treatment will vary, so the information given is a general guide. 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, St James Hospital (LS9 7TF).

Please do not bring any valuables into hospital with you as the Trust cannot accept liability for loss or theft.
What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is the use of high energy X-rays and other types of radiation to treat cancer. The tissues of the body are made up of tiny building blocks called cells. The radiotherapy causes damage to cancer cells in the treated area. Although normal cells are also affected, they can repair themselves and are able to recover. Radiotherapy is a local treatment. This means it only affects the part of the body that is treated.

You will have your radiotherapy on a treatment machine called a linear accelerator, shown here in the photograph.

When you are having your radiotherapy you do not feel anything and it does not make you radioactive. It is perfectly safe for you to be with other people, including children, throughout your treatment.

Therapy Radiographers

Radiotherapy is given by male and female therapeutic radiographers who are highly trained in the accurate planning and delivery of radiotherapy treatment.

You will see your radiographers at each treatment session and they will be happy to answer any questions you may have.
Students
Please be aware that the radiotherapy department is a training centre for male and female radiographers. Students may be present on the treatment units. They are supervised at all times. If you do not wish students to be present during your treatment please speak to a member of staff.
This will not affect your treatment or care.

Pregnancy
It is important that women do not become pregnant while having cancer treatment because the radiotherapy and chemotherapy can have an effect on the unborn child. It is suggested that you use a barrier form of contraception (for example condoms). For more information see the ‘Contraception and pregnancy during cancer treatment’ leaflet. Please do not hesitate to ask your doctor or nurse if you have any questions or concerns about these issues.

How often is it given?
Radiotherapy can be given in various length courses and your doctor will explain the schedule they think best for you. Sometimes, a five day course of treatment is prescribed. This is followed by a two week break before having another course of five days treatment (often called split course radiotherapy). Treatment is given daily, Monday to Friday, and may start on any day of the week. It is important to attend for all of the treatment sessions. If you feel that you are unable to attend for any reason, please telephone us as soon as possible so that we can discuss this with you.
Do I need to stay in hospital for treatment?

Your treatment is usually given as an outpatient. If your symptoms or side-effects are causing you problems, your doctor or specialist nurse may suggest a stay in hospital.

Planning your radiotherapy

Your first appointment for radiotherapy will be a planning appointment. This will be used to gather all the information we need to accurately plan your treatment. You will be contacted by phone, with an appointment for your radiotherapy planning session. Some tests and scans may be needed to help plan your treatment. We will explain which of these you will need when your appointment is made.

You may see your clinical oncologist (or a member of their team) at this appointment. This is an ideal opportunity for you to ask questions. If you have not previously consented to your treatment you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What to bring with you:

• a list of all questions you may have;
• an up-to-date list of all the medications you are taking (including inhalers, sprays, vitamins or herbal products);
• any medication that you may need during your visit;
• something to eat and drink and something to occupy yourself with as this first visit can be quite lengthy (up to two hours).
**Mould room**

You need to wear a mask for your treatment; you will be given an appointment to attend Mould Room where the masks are made. A mask, shown here in the picture, is needed to help you stay still for treatment. You will wear your mask for your planning scan and treatments.

If you have any concerns about the mask, please let your clinical oncologist or a member of their team know. We have a support team who will help you. They can be contacted on 0113 206 7616 or email leedsth-tr.rtpatientsupport@nhs.net
Your planning scan

In order to plan your treatment you will have a CT scan. This is done on a machine called a CT Simulator, shown here in the photograph. This is a CT scanner that allows the images to be sent to the radiotherapy computer planning system. There will be several members of staff present at your scan. These may include therapy radiographers, a mould room technician and a dosimetrist (the person who will produce the computer plan for your treatment).

Radiographers will talk to you about future appointments and will give you an appointment slip for you to start radiotherapy treatment. This can also be used to allow you to exit the multi-storey car park free of charge.
Nursing clinic in Princess Royal Suite
You may be made an appointment to meet the nursing team in the radiotherapy review clinic to advise on how to look after yourself during your treatment.

Having your radiotherapy
When you arrive for your treatment you should go to the reception desk at the entrance of the radiotherapy department. You will be shown round if possible or given directions to your treatment machine. The radiographers will then talk to you and explain what will happen during your treatment and answer any questions that you may have. You will be given a full list of all your treatment and clinic appointments. Occasionally, your appointment times may be altered at a later point, but this would be discussed with you. There may be occasions when you may have a longer stay in the department or be asked to attend at a different time, e.g. to see your oncologist, and these appointments will be on your list.
In the treatment room

Each treatment session follows the same format, so once you have had your first appointment, you will know what to expect.

The mask that you had made in the Mould Room and wore during your planning CT scan will be ready for you on your treatment machine. The radiographers will fit this and position you in it on the treatment couch. You will be asked to stay as still as possible during the treatment but you should breathe and swallow normally. Once you are in the correct position the radiographers will leave the room to switch on the machine and begin the treatment. There are closed circuit (CCTV) cameras in the treatment room that the radiographers use to observe you during the treatment, (this is not saving or recording images) and an intercom system so they can talk to you if needed.
The treatment machine makes a buzzing sound when switched on. You do not feel anything. The radiographers may need to come in and out part way through each treatment. The machine stops automatically after your prescribed dose of treatment has been given. The radiographers can stop the machine at any time if needed.

After the treatment is complete the radiographers will come back in to the room to help you off the couch.
On some days the radiotherapy department may be busy and there may be a delay before your treatment. We will keep you informed of any delays. Your treatments will generally be on the same machine, although there may be days when this machine is being serviced and your treatment will be in a different room.

It may be a good idea to bring something to eat and drink with you, along with any medication you may need. There is a restaurant and café available on Level 0.

If you have any queries about your appointment times please discuss these with the radiotherapy coordinators or radiographers on the treatment unit.

For appointment queries please telephone the radiotherapy reception desk **0113 206 8940** for further advice.
Side-effects

You may experience side-effects from the radiotherapy treatment. Side-effects can be mild or more troublesome. Some side-effects are common, whilst others are rare. The side-effects you get will depend on the type of radiotherapy you have. Your doctor will explain this to you. The side-effects listed here are a general guide.

Most side-effects are temporary. Side-effects tend to build up and can happen whilst you are on treatment or shortly after you have finished your course of treatment. They generally last a number of weeks after the treatment.

Skin reactions

The skin in the treated area starts to redden or darken from about the second week of treatment. It may become dry and itchy. If the skin is already red before the start of the radiotherapy, it can get worse through treatment and there is a possibility that it might become weepy and that you may require dressings. The skin reaction towards the end of treatment is normal and will heal over a few weeks.

If you feel you must shave in the treatment area only use an electric razor with extreme care. The hair in the treated area may stop growing during treatment.

The radiographers will give you more information about this at the start of your treatment and give you a leaflet with information on how to care for your skin and contact numbers. The same will happen at the end of your treatment.

If you are concerned about your skin reaction please talk to your radiographers or telephone the review clinic nursing staff in the Princess Royal Suite on: 0113 206 7587.
**Tiredness (fatigue)**

Nearly all patients having radiotherapy will feel tired. Be prepared to take things easy during treatment and allow for extra rests. There is a Macmillan information leaflet available ‘Coping with fatigue’. If you would like a copy, or support with your fatigue please ask a member of staff.

**Sore throat and throat ulcers**

This can make swallowing difficult. We will give advice to help you keep up your calorie intake and prescribe painkillers to make you more comfortable. Once the soreness settles after treatment you will be able to reduce your painkillers. If you have any queries about your painkillers after treatment please contact your palliative nurse specialist, your consultant’s team or your GP.

**Dry mouth**

It helps if you take small sips of water regularly. If the salivary glands are in the area treated, dryness of your mouth can be long lasting.

**Sticky, thick saliva or phlegm**

You may produce more or thicker phlegm which can be uncomfortable and make you want to cough. We may suggest using a nebuliser to help; the radiotherapy nurses will give you advice. Drinking soda water can help loosen the secretions.

However do not drink if you have been advised that there is a risk of things going down the wrong way. Please discuss this with a member of your medical team if you are at all concerned.
**Loss of taste**
Foods may start tasting the same with some types of treatment. Some patients describe food tasting ‘like cardboard’. Your sense of taste will generally improve after radiotherapy. We can give you extra advice about coping with taste changes.

**Chest infection**
This can happen if food or liquid goes down the wrong way. It is important to tell the medical team if you are coughing or spluttering after swallowing as this may mean that food or liquid is going into your lungs rather than your stomach.

**Sickness**
If you feel sick (nauseous) during treatment we can prescribe medication to help ease this. Please let a member of your healthcare team know if you feel sick or have been sick.

**Constipation**
Your bowel habit can be affected by changes in your diet and using painkillers or anti-sickness medications. It is important to keep using your medications regularly but please let us know if you are having difficulties opening your bowels.

**Speech and voice**
You may notice parts of your mouth and throat feel swollen and sore. This can sometimes affect the quality of your speech - so you may sound a little unclear and people might have more difficulty understanding you. This swelling can also cause your voice to sound hoarse, husky or go completely. When you have finished your radiotherapy and the side-effects settle, your speech and voice will usually return to normal.
Mouth care and radiotherapy

Your mouth may become sore during your radiotherapy. Good mouth care helps to keep your mouth clean and comfortable. These are some tips for looking after your mouth during and after radiotherapy.

During and shortly after radiotherapy:

- Clean your teeth and gums as thoroughly as you can morning and night. You can clean after meals if necessary using a very soft ‘baby’ toothbrush;
- If you have your own teeth, use fluoride toothpaste to help protect your teeth from decay;
- If you have dentures you may wish to leave them out if your mouth is sore. Clean your dentures thoroughly after use with a suitable brush and leave them to soak in a fresh solution of Dentural or Steradent;
- Use salt water (saline) mouthwashes every four hours during the day and after every meal. We will give you a saline mouthwash at the hospital. Use this mouthwash to swill around your mouth and spit out. If you have dentures you can use a pink foam stick to dip into the saline to rub around your gums followed by swilling the saline around your mouth and spitting out. If your mouth becomes sore it may help to use the saline mouthwashes hourly;
- The medical team may recommend other mouthwashes to use after the saline to protect the lining of your mouth. Do not use any mouthwashes bought from the chemist or supermarkets;
• Keep your mouth moist with sips of water. Artificial saliva sprays, gels or lozenges may be helpful. Try chewing gum or sucking sweets;
• If your lips become sore, we can give you a paraffin ointment to rub in to protect them;
• Let us know if you notice any white or yellow patches in your mouth. These can be due to thrush infection; anti-fungal treatments will be prescribed;
• Avoid acidic drinks e.g. fruit juice and foods that make your mouth sting;
• Do not drink alcohol as this will make your mouth sorer.

Speech and swallowing during radiotherapy
Some swallowing difficulties may be mild and can be managed easily. Here are a few simple changes you can make to what and how you eat and drink:
• Make sure you take any medication given to you by the doctor and if you are still experiencing some pain or discomfort please tell the radiographers or nurses as soon as possible;
• Make sure you drink plenty of water throughout your treatment, to stop your mouth becoming too dry;
• Eat a soft and moist diet rather than dry, hard or crumbly foods. Use lots of sauces and gravy to help the food go down;
• Avoid distractions when eating and drinking. Turn off the television and do not talk when chewing and swallowing;
• Take your time when eating. Do not rush;
• Do not throw your head back when having a drink. Keep your chin down.
Research at Leeds Cancer Centre

Leeds Cancer Centre is a major centre for cancer research. You may be asked if you would like to take part in clinical studies or trials linked to your condition. You do not have to take part in any trials, unless you wish to do so. Your treatment will not be affected in any way if you do not wish to take part in a trial. If you do take part in a clinical trial you may meet a research nurse or radiographer who will be helping to run the trial.

Further information and support

We all have our own ways of coping with difficulties. Some people have a close network of family and friends who provide emotional support, others would rather seek help from people who are not involved with their illness. If you have any questions or need more support please ask your hospital team.

Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNS)

Your CNS is available to discuss any aspect of your treatment with you. You will be seen by a Clinical Nurse Specialist before you start your treatment. This is to offer support and advice about the practicalities and effects of treatment and answer any questions you may have. The CNS will also assess and discuss any physical, psychological, social, occupational or spiritual needs that you may have. They can refer you to other services if needed, for instance, benefits advice. You should be given a ‘key worker’ as a contact for support through your treatment; this is usually the CNS.
Macmillan Radiographer and Nurse Specialists
Sometimes people need more help if they are feeling depressed, very anxious or are having problems accepting their diagnosis. If this is the case you may benefit from seeing the Macmillan radiographer or nurse specialist. Your doctor, radiographer, nurse, or dietitian can refer you. Available Monday - Friday 9.00am - 6.00pm 0113 206 7616

Leeds Cancer Support
Leeds Cancer Support complements care provided by your clinical team. We offer access to information and a wide range of support, in a welcoming environment for you, your family and friends. We can be found in the information lounges in Bexley Wing and also in the purpose built Robert Ogden Macmillan Centre.

The Robert Ogden Macmillan Centre
The Centre is on the St James’s Hospital site and offers a variety of support services including counselling, support groups and complementary therapies. These therapies include Reiki, relaxation and visualisation, hand and foot massage and many others. You can just drop in for a coffee and a chat anytime.

Information Lounge Level 1 Outpatients Department
Open from 10am - 4pm Tel: (0113) 206 8816

Information Lounge Level -2 Radiotherapy Department
Open from 8.00am - 6.00pm Tel: (0113) 206 8940

Robert Ogden Macmillan Centre
Open from 10am - 4pm Tel: (0113) 206 6498

All the above services can be emailed on: leedsth-tr.Cancersupport@nhs.net
Macmillan Cancer Support
Freephone: 0808 808 0000, 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday
A textphone service is available for deaf and hard of hearing people on 108001 0808 808 0000.
website: www.macmillan.org.uk
e-mail: cancerline@macmillan.org.uk

Changing Faces
A national charity committed to providing help for people with disfigurements.
Support, information and advice: Tel 0300 012 0275

Mouth cancer foundation
A UK charity aiming to support people with mouth, throat and other head and neck cancer.
website: www.mouthcancerfoundation.org

Alcoholics Anonymous
Tel: 0800 9177 650  e-mail: help@aamail.org
website: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Stopping smoking
One You Leeds: Tel 0800 169 4219  website: oneyouleeds.org.uk
NHS Smokefree: Tel 0300 123 1044