

Patient Information

## Arden Cancer Centre

# Radiotherapy information for patients having treatment to the skin

## What is Radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is the use of high-energy radiation, usually x-rays, to kill cancer cells in the area being treated. Radiotherapy can damage normal cells in the treatment area too but they can usually repair themselves, whereas cancer cells can't. The damage to normal cells results in some side effects but radiotherapy is planned very carefully to avoid treating as much healthy tissue as possible in order to reduce these side effects.

Radiotherapy is delivered by highly trained staff called Therapy Radiographers on machines called Linear Accelerators, and some superficial skin treatments are given on a smaller machine called Gulmay.

Both male and female staff will treat you. We are a teaching hospital and have student radiographers on placement in radiotherapy who are supervised by trained staff.

## Consent forms

Before you undergo this procedure you will be required to sign a consent form which indicates that your doctor has explained the treatment procedure and any possible side effects to you.

## Pacemakers

**If you have a pacemaker please mention this both to your doctor and also the radiographers, before your treatment planning.**



## Patient Information

### **Pregnancy**

If you are, or become, pregnant at any time before or during your treatment it is important to inform a member of staff as soon as possible. There is a significant risk to an unborn baby from radiotherapy.

If you are pregnant, it is sometimes possible to proceed with treatment and overcome the risk by adjusting your treatment plan. This would only be done with your full involvement and consent following discussion with your consultant.

For advice on contraception please speak to your consultant or GP.

### **Preparation before treatment starts**

The area to be treated will be marked using a felt tipped pen. Usually it is possible to take a photograph of the marks so that if they get faint, the Radiotherapy radiographers can re-mark them. In some cases, with your permission, it may be possible to put tiny permanent dots of dye just beneath the skin, which will not wash off, but we would not do this on the face. Some patients who are having treatment to the face or head will need to have a special mask made (see below) and we can put the marks onto that instead of on the skin.

In order to make the mask, you may need to have a mould made of part of your skin before treatment can start. This may be made of lead or other material depending on the type of treatment that you are having. This is so that treatment can be lined up accurately and areas that don't need treating can be protected. This is made in the Mould Room at the Arden Cancer Centre before treatment starts. There is a separate leaflet explaining this procedure. It may take us a couple of weeks to prepare this before your treatment can start.

### **Treatment**

Unlike other radiotherapy treatments, skin treatment using superficial x-rays or electrons involves the machine applicator coming into contact with your skin. You may feel some pressure from the contact of the machine but it shouldn't be painful.

Once you and the treatment machine are in the correct position the radiographers will leave the room to switch the machine on. It is important that you keep quite still while treatment takes place.

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The radiographers will be able to see you on a television monitor, if you need them raise your hand and they will switch off the machine and come into you immediately.

### **Internal Eye Shields**

If the area to be treated is close to the eye it may be necessary to protect the eye using an internal eye shield. These go over the eye in the same way as a contact lens, resting on the eyeball beneath the eyelids.

However, internal eye shields are thicker than a contact lens so the radiographers will put two or three anaesthetic eye drops into your eye to numb it temporarily so you feel nothing when the eye shield is either slipped in or removed.

After the eye shield has been removed, a soft eye pad will be strapped over the affected eye to protect it. It is very important to keep this on until the numbness wears off, probably for two to three hours, because during this time you would not feel anything getting into your eye such as grit, which could result in permanent damage.

You should not drive with the eye pad on, so if you have nobody to drive for you, please wait in the Arden Centre, until the pad can be safely removed or ask about hospital transport.

### **Lead Masks**

Another method of treating close to the eye whilst at the same time protecting the eye from the radiation effect, is to use a special lead mask which fits closely over the area to be treated (as mentioned above).

### **Lead Shielding**

For most patients neither of the above methods is necessary. Any required eye protection can be efficiently achieved by placing small pieces of lead over the outside of the eyes, on top of the eyelids.

If the area to be treated is close to the nose or mouth it may be necessary to place small pieces of lead inside these areas to protect the mucosal lining.

When the area to be treated is an irregular shape it may be necessary to place pieces of lead onto the skin to protect the skin around the area to be treated.

### Side Effects of Treatment

Side effects will be confined to the area treated together with a small amount of tissue directly beneath this.

Possible side effects are:

- **Sore skin:** The skin treated is likely to become pink and slightly itchy about a week after your first treatment. In some cases the area can become very sore and can become weepy and bleed, blisters and scabs may form after the treatment has finished, this may last for 6-12 weeks.
- **Lining of the nose:** If treatment is to the skin of the nose, a small part of the nose lining could be affected resulting in mild nose bleeds, particularly after blowing your nose. Scabs and dry blood inside the nose may make breathing through your nose difficult. This may occur about a week after the start of treatment and could continue for several weeks (see advice on nasal douching below). **If you are taking warfarin and the bleeding is excessive, you must seek medical advice.**
- **Inside of your mouth:** Similarly, if treatment is close to your lips, a small area of the lining inside your mouth just beneath the treated surface might get sore and take a few weeks to recover. It may help to gargle with some salt water (mix half a teaspoon of salt in a pint of warm water). For sore lips apply a lip balm / moisturiser.
- **Hair loss:** Hair loss only occurs in the area treated. Therefore, there could be corresponding small amounts of hair loss from the eyebrows, eyelashes, scalp, or in men the moustache, beard or chest area if these areas are treated. This would occur two to three weeks after the first treatment. Re-growth may take place within three months but this hair loss could be permanent. Your doctor will discuss this with you before your radiotherapy starts.

### Skincare during your treatment

- Wash treated area daily with your usual soap or shower gel and pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- Apply your usual skin moisturiser on the treatment area two or three times a day. Gently smooth it onto your skin until it is absorbed. Do not apply just before your treatment.
- If you need to, ask your GP to prescribe a suitable skin moisturiser, otherwise discuss this with your treatment radiographers at the start of your treatment. You can have a sample moisturiser to try .

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- Wear loose-fitting clothing next to the skin (cotton is a good natural fibre) in the treatment area.
- Avoid any perfumes, aftershaves, make-up or other creams in the treated area.
- Avoid the use of sun lamps, spray tans or skin colouring lotions.
- Avoid using hot water bottles or ice packs in the treatment area.
- Keep the treated area out of the sun during treatment; care should be taken in the future by using a high factor sun cream – factor 30 or above.
- Avoid shaving in the area being treated (if you have to shave then use an electric razor for dry shaving only. When the skin becomes visibly red, stop shaving). No wet shaving, hair removal creams or wax should be used.
- If treating the head / scalp, wash hair gently with shampoo; avoid using a hairdryer or hair dye.
- You may continue to swim if your skin is intact and not visibly red, providing that you wash the treatment area before and afterwards and apply moisturiser.

If the skin becomes very sore or broken you will be seen by the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist or Tissue Viability Assistant Practitioner who can provide creams and dressings as required.

## **Skin care after completing treatment**

When you've finished your treatment course you will need to continue with the skincare above until any soreness has settled down. Do not rub the skin in the treated area or attempt to remove any remaining marks until the treatment effect has subsided. If it scabs or crusts wash around this but leave the crusting alone.

### **Irritation**

The treated area will probably feel itchy at the end of treatment; avoid scratching the area. Your consultant may be able to prescribe a cream to help with this if it becomes a problem or try using a moisturising cream as above.

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### **Crusting or scabbing**

With some types of disease treated with X-rays or electrons, the treated area may crust over and form a scab which may weep or bleed if knocked. The healing takes place beneath this crust, and although temporarily you may feel the area looks worse than before treatment, this is a perfectly normal part of the healing process.

Leave the crust alone, do not pull it off. It will loosen and drop off and another one may form as healing continues. During this time it might bleed slightly but this is nothing to worry about. It is generally better left uncovered, exposed to the air, and the crust kept as dry as possible. It can take 2-12 weeks to heal after treatment is complete.

If at any time you suspect that there is infection under the crust, please contact your own doctor.

### **Nasal Douching**

Sometimes the lining inside your nose can become very sore and scabs may form which make it difficult for you to breathe through your nose.

You can loosen these scabs by nasal douching or rinsing:

- Take a large glass or half a pint of slightly warm water (previously boiled and then allowed to cool down). Add ¼ teaspoon each of table salt, sugar and sodium bicarbonate (bicarbonate of soda) and mix well.
- Pour small quantities of the mixture into your cupped hand or use an eggcup full.
- Hold your hand next to the nostrils, and sniff the mixture into your nose.
- The mixture will pass into the nose and then to the back of the nose where it joins the throat.
- Allow the solution to drain out of the nostrils and spit out any of the solution which comes into your mouth into a bowl or sink.
- You could alternatively use a clean 'spray' type bottle, or use a syringe to squirt it in to your nostril.
- This is a little distasteful at first, but it is well worth continuing - repeat until the whole glassful is used up.
- Do this two times per day if needed.

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- Do not be alarmed by the material that you might spit out – it can be blood stained and of varying colours, thickness and shapes.
- Continue douching until your nasal breathing improves/ as needed.

### **Avoid sun and injury after treatment**

After the treatment effect has subsided, the treated skin will remain more fragile than the surrounding area, so care should be taken to avoid injury to it. It will also remain more sensitive to sun than adjacent untreated skin, so continue to keep strong sun off this area and use a high factor sun screen cream – factor 30 or above.

## **Treatment Reviews**

At some point during your treatment you may be booked in for a 'treatment review'. This review can be with either a review radiographer or a doctor. The aim of this review is to discuss any side effects that you may be experiencing as a result of your treatment, and any side effects that may occur as the treatment continues.

It is not usually possible to give you any information on how effective the treatment has been until several weeks after as there is a delay in the way that radiotherapy works, so the effects of treatment can't be assessed until a number of weeks after the treatment has finished.

## **Follow-up appointments**

Your Radiotherapy consultant will want to check your progress at an out-patient clinic, usually about 6-12 weeks after the end of treatment. This will be posted to you after completion of your treatment. If you haven't received this within 3 weeks of completing treatment, please telephone radiotherapy reception on 024 7696 7272.

## Where is the Arden Centre?

The Arden Centre is situated in the west wing of University Hospital Coventry. Please visit the University Hospital web site for up to date maps and directions: [www.uhcv.nhs.uk](http://www.uhcv.nhs.uk)

## How shall I travel?

### By car

You can drive whilst having radiotherapy treatment unless you have been advised not to for another reason.

Sat Nav postcode: CV2 2DX

At busy times it can be very difficult to park so please allow extra time. There are several visitor car parks across the site and there are drop-off points near the main entrance and the Women's and Children's entrance which allow for 10 minutes of free parking. Disabled car parking facilities are located near the main entrance. Charges apply in all car parks and Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) is live across all visitor car parks, this means that our car parks no longer issue tickets at barriers and instead read your number plate as you enter. Payment is then required at one of the payment machines before exiting the car park and can be made using cash, card or contactless. Payment can also be made by telephone or online before midnight, see the trust website for details.

**However, you are entitled to free parking whilst on radiotherapy treatment, you will need to give your registration number to the Arden Centre receptionist on arrival, if you don't know your registration number we suggest you make a note of it or take a photo of the number plate. Please note that free parking does not include clinic appointments, complementary therapy and counselling appointments, all of which must be paid for.**

### Public Transport

Many bus routes include the hospital with buses driving onto the site, stopping close to the main entrance. **For more information about bus services to University Hospital call the traveline on: 0870 608 2608 or visit [www.networkwestmidlands.com](http://www.networkwestmidlands.com).**



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### **Hospital transport**

Hospital transport is available where there is a medical need, not for social or financial reasons.

If you receive Disability Living Allowance Mobility Component or have a vehicle under the mobility scheme you may not be entitled to access hospital transport.

If you need hospital transport and feel that you are eligible you will need to book it yourself, giving 48 hours notice. You will need to telephone:

#### **West Midlands Ambulance Service:**

01926 310312 (for bookings only)

01926 488410 (for queries on day of travel only)

#### **Leicestershire Ambulance Service / Arriva / Ambuline:**

0845 2669662

#### **Northamptonshire Ambulance / NSL: 0843 2086888**

#### **Worcestershire Acute Trust Transport Service:**

0121 3079116 (for bookings)

01926 310311 (for queries on day of travel)

In most cases you will not be able to bring anyone with you. Whilst your transport will be booked to get you to the hospital for your appointment time this cannot be guaranteed but you will be treated as soon as possible after you arrive. Due to the demand on the hospital transport service patients will often be waiting at the Arden Centre to be taken home for some considerable time. We advise that, where possible, patients make their own travel arrangements. If you have to rely on the hospital transport service, please ensure that you bring food, drinks and any medication that you may need for the day with you. There is a refreshment kiosk available to buy snacks and drinks which is open from 10am-4pm.

## **Transport Schemes**

There are transport schemes operating in some areas. These schemes will charge a mileage rate which varies. For more information please ask to speak to the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist.

## **Travel costs**

The NHS Hospital Travel Cost Scheme enables people in receipt of certain benefits or who are on a low income to claim back some of their travel costs. Please ask to speak to the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist for more information.

## **Prescriptions**

All cancer patients are entitled to free prescriptions. If you haven't already got an exemption card please ask a member of staff for an application form.

## **Appointments**

The department is usually open from 9.00am – 5.00pm Monday to Friday and is closed at weekends and on public holidays.

Radiotherapy treatment machines are very complex and they are maintained by a team of in house physicists and technicians. Delays in treatment can occur due to machine breakdowns and servicing.

Breaks in treatment due to public holidays and machine maintenance do not affect most people's treatment. However, some patients may be asked to come in for treatment on these days, when a different treatment machine could be used.

It is not advisable for you to miss any other appointments, but if it is unavoidable please talk to the radiographers who are treating you.

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The radiographers arrange treatment appointment times. Every effort will be made to give you times that you prefer, but with a heavy workload this cannot be guaranteed.

It is important that we have a contact telephone number for you as we often have to telephone patients at short notice, about appointments or with other information.

If your telephone is set to bar incoming calls from withheld numbers, please give us an alternative telephone number.

## Counselling

There is a counselling service available at the Arden Centre, for more information speak to your specialist nurse, doctor or radiographer, or telephone 024 7696 7478.

This is available on an individual basis and is completely free of charge.

## Complementary therapy

Aromatherapy, reiki, massage, reflexology and yoga are available to oncology patients. Therapists are volunteers and provide their services to patients free of charge.

The complementary service is by appointment only, please ask a member of staff, or telephone 024 7696 7290.

The Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist is available in the department to help you with any queries concerning the above. Please ask at the reception desk.

## **Information and Support**

### **Macmillan Cancer Information Centre - 024 7696 6052**

We can offer free support, practical advice and information to anyone affected by cancer. No appointments are required and an answering machine facility is available. Open Monday to Friday 9.00am to 4.00pm, the Centre is located on the ground floor in the main entrance.

You may find these Cancer information booklets useful:

- Understanding Radiotherapy
- Understanding Cancer of the Skin

## **Useful Telephone numbers**

### **Arden Cancer Centre – Radiotherapy Reception - 024 7696 7272**

Open Monday to Friday 9.00am - 5.00pm

### **Cancer and radiotherapy information and advice - 024 7696 7290**

#### **Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist**

Available Monday – Friday 9.30am to 4.30pm

### **Oncology Out-Patient reception - 024 7696 6354 (clinic 1)**

Open Monday – Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm

### **Oncology Ward 35 (emergency only) - 024 7696 5525 or 024 7696 5528 or 024 7696 5531**

Ask to speak to the Nurse in Charge – 24 hours

**NHS advice** - use the 111 service

### **Macmillan Cancer Support - 0808 808 00 00**

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

### **Cancer Research UK - 0300 123 1022**

[www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

### Patient Satisfaction

We hope that you have found this booklet helpful. We welcome your comments on the care that you experience and the service that we offer within the Arden Cancer Centre.

We ask that specific complaints be addressed to a member of staff so that, in line with University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust's complaints policy, they can be dealt with quickly and efficiently.

If you need help, information or advice, either during, or at any time after your course of treatment has finished, please telephone: **024 7696 7290**, Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm and speak to the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact **024 7696 7290** and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy. Help to stop smoking can be obtained from your local NHS Stop Smoking Service: Tel. **0300 123 1044**

Written by Alison Crichton and Julia Biggs (Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists),  
with the help and advice from the Medical Staff and Radiotherapy Radiographers of the Arden Cancer Centre, University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust, Coventry, CV2 2DX

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