

Arden Cancer Centre

Radiotherapy: General Information for Patients Receiving Treatment

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 mostly repair themselves after a short period of time. . 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, although some superficial skin treatments are given on smaller machines.

Radiotherapy does not hurt, but you may experience some side effects as treatment progresses.

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 to both your doctor and also the radiographers, before your first treatment.



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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.

Chemotherapy

Your doctor may also prescribe chemotherapy to be administered during your course of radiotherapy. You will be given specific written information and consented separately for this.

What is treatment planning?

In order to treat you accurately and reduce side effects your radiotherapy treatment must be carefully planned. This will involve having a CT scan in the radiotherapy department.

There may then be a gap of up to 3 weeks before your treatment starts, during which time doctors, physics staff and radiographers are preparing your treatment.

You may be required to remove some of your clothing for your CT scan and subsequent treatment. Only the part of your body that will be treated will be uncovered and every effort will be made to keep you covered where possible. Women who are having the chest treated might like to wear a small crop top which can then be pulled down when required. Please ask if you are unsure.

Mould room

If you are having treatment to your head or neck it may be necessary to have a plastic mask (or mould) made before your treatment is planned. This means that we don't have to put marks on your face and will help you to keep your head still.

If a mask is required we will explain to you in more detail how we will make it. There is a separate booklet describing this. Please ask for more information.

Contrast

Sometimes a contrast medium is used to help the radiographers, doctors and physics team to see organs more clearly on the CT scan. This can be

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given orally, injected into a vein or both. You will be told if you need contrast and given information about it. If you have had contrast before and had any kind of reaction to it please let your doctor or the radiographers know. This is normally only required for treatment planning and not whilst you are on daily radiotherapy.

Skin marks

Normally when your treatment is planned you will have marks put onto your skin. These marks correspond to the area that will be treated. In most cases, with your permission, we can put tiny permanent dots of dye just beneath the skin, which will not wash off, called a tattoo. If we are unable to do this you will need to keep felt tip pen marks on your skin for all of your treatment.

The radiographers may take a digital photograph of the area being treated for reference.

Treatment

The radiographers will deliver the treatment as prescribed by your consultant. It is essential to make sure treatment is given safely and accurately, and you will be positioned on the treatment couch in the same way as when your treatment was planned.

The radiographers will line you up with the machine by dimming the room lights and using laser lights and a bright light from the machine. The machine may move around you during this process but in most cases will not touch you.

When you and the machine are in the correct position, the radiographers will leave the room to switch the machine on. You will need to lie quite still but can breathe normally. You will not feel anything during the treatment but the machine will make a buzzing noise. Periodically it is necessary to take some images of the treatment area during your actual treatment. The treatment times are very short, but it may take a little time before treatment can start whilst the radiographers take images and check the treatment. Most people will be in the treatment room for about 15-20 minutes, but sometimes it can take a little longer.

The radiographers will be watching you throughout on closed circuit television cameras and can hear you on an intercom. They can switch the machine off and enter the room if you move or call them.

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Once the machine has switched off there is no radiation present; you will not be radioactive and are safe to be near pregnant women and children.

Radiotherapy Side Effects

Radiotherapy side effects generally occur about 7-10 days after treatment has started and may last for a few weeks afterwards. It is important to continue with your regular medication as advised by your doctor.

Will the treatment make my hair fall out?

Radiotherapy only causes hair loss from your head when your scalp is treated or the back of your neck. If hair loss is a possibility for you this will be discussed with you beforehand. You can continue to wash and dry your hair normally, unless specifically asked not to. Hair loss from other areas of your body can occur if these are within the area treated, such as underarm hair, pubic hair, or chest hair in men.

Will it make me radioactive?

No. Radiation is only present while the machine is treating. Immediately it switches off there is no radiation or radioactivity in your body or the treatment room. Your treatment will not affect anyone else and you can continue mixing with people normally.

Will I be sick?

For most people this is unlikely, but it does depend upon the area of body treated. If you experience nausea, please mention this to the radiotherapy staff so that medication can be prescribed.

How will it affect my skin?

This depends partly on your skin type and partly on the treatment prescribed for you. In general terms, your skin over the treatment area might become pink and itchy. Rarely moist patches may develop.

We advise that you:

- Wash the treated area daily with your usual soap or shower gel and pat your skin dry with a soft towel.

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- 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 radiotherapy. They may be able to give you a sample moisturiser to try.
- Wear loose-fitting clothing next to the skin (cotton is a good natural fibre).
- Avoid any perfumes, aftershaves, make-up, hair dye 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 and 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. If the skin becomes visibly red, stop shaving). No wet shaving, hair removal creams, lasers or wax should be used.
- Avoid using sticky tape in the treatment area such as Elastoplast or Micropore.
- Drink plenty of fluids.

Swimming

You may continue to swim if your skin is not blistered or peeling, providing that you wash the treatment area before and afterwards and apply moisturiser. Care should be taken as chlorinated water can have a drying effect on the skin. Do not swim if you have an infection or your skin is irritated.

What other side effects might I experience?

The most common side effect is a feeling of increased tiredness. Sometimes light exercise can help with fatigue but if you get very tired, please try to have extra rest and drink plenty of fluids.

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Side effects depend on which area of the body is treated. The side effects described above are general to most radiotherapy patients. Some side effects appear only if specific areas of the body are treated. The next section describes these.

Treatment to the abdomen, pelvis or lumbar-sacral spine

If your abdomen or pelvis is in the treatment area, your bowels may be irritated and you may experience a change in bowel habit, loose stools or diarrhoea, and occasionally nausea and sickness.

If your bladder is in the treatment area you may also experience urinary frequency and cystitis symptoms.

We advise that you:-

- Drink plenty of fluids
- Eat a normal diet, unless advised otherwise
- Try to cut down on caffeinated tea and coffee, and avoid alcohol

For these side effects medication can be prescribed to help, such as anti-sickness or anti-diarrhoea tablets.

Radiotherapy to the abdomen or pelvis can also affect fertility and sexual function; your consultant will discuss this with you.

Treatment to the chest or thoracic spine

You may experience the sensation of having a lump in your throat when swallowing or of indigestion, or heartburn. This is caused by the radiotherapy and should disappear within a few weeks of the treatment finishing. This can be quite painful, therefore soluble pain medication may help or antacids such as Gaviscon or Peptac.

We recommend you eat softer foods that can be swallowed more easily e.g. by adding extra sauce, mashing or blending. Supplement drinks may be prescribed by your GP. If needed, there is an oncology Dietitian available who can advise you about your diet and nutrition whilst attending for treatment.

If you have a cough when you start your treatment, you may find that this becomes slightly more troublesome in the short term, due to the radiation

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effect. Simple cough linctus may help or pain medication could be prescribed to help you. Please ask if you have need of this.

A few patients having their chest treated find that, due to their disease, they are very short of breath and may need advice about how to cope with this.

Male patients may experience some chest hair loss from the treated area, occurring about three weeks after their first treatment.

Treatment to the mouth or neck or cervical spine

If your mouth or neck is included in the treatment area you may experience a sore throat and difficulty swallowing. We advise that you:

- Keep your mouth and throat moist with regular sips of water
- Avoid drinks that dry your mouth such as alcohol
- Do not use a commercial mouthwash as they may contain alcohol which will dry and irritate your mouth. Mouthwash can be prescribed for you
- Use a **salt-water mouthwash** to help keep your mouth clean. Mix half a teaspoon of salt in a pint of lukewarm water, rinse around your mouth, gargle and spit out.
- Avoid food that is rough, hard or sharp and very spicy, salty or acidic tasting food as it can irritate your mouth or throat
- Avoid very hot or cold temperatures of food and drink
- Modify the texture of your food by adding extra sauce, mashing or blending
- Supplement drinks may be prescribed

Short courses of radiotherapy

Sometimes your radiotherapy consultant will decide that the best method of treatment for you is either one single treatment, or a short course of 5 or less treatments. Side effects for each area are listed above.

When treatment is given in this way, most side effects occur about 7 days after your first treatment and not during the treatment itself. If you experience problems please contact the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists on 024 7696 7290 or your Macmillan Cancer Nurse Specialist.

Sometimes a single dose of radiotherapy can make you feel unwell later in the day or night. If you experience problems out of hours either contact your

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own GP or Oncology Ward 35 at University Hospital, Coventry: 024 7696 5528

Late side effects

Late effects of radiotherapy can occur months or years after completion of treatment. They are specific to the area treated and the dose received and should have been discussed with you when you consented for your treatment. If you want any further information or are concerned about these effects please ask to speak to your consultant or the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist.

Treatment reviews

At some point during your treatment you may be booked in for a 'treatment review'. This review can be with a review radiographer, a doctor or a specialist nurse. 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 so far has been at these review sessions for two reasons:

- Firstly, although we take pictures of the treatment area during your radiotherapy, they are to check the position of the treatment field and are not detailed enough to show us how well the treatment is working.
- Secondly, 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.

After Treatment

The early side effects from the treatment will continue for several weeks after the treatment course has been completed.

After finishing treatment, you will receive an appointment to see your consultant 6-12 weeks later. If you haven't received this within three weeks of completing treatment please telephone your doctor's secretary.

If you have any problems before then, you can contact the **Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists** on **024 7696 7290**.

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.

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.**

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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)

Thames Ambulance Service (Leicestershire) 0345 241 3012

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 from 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.

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.

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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. 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.

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.

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.

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

The Complementary therapies are by appointment only, please ask a member of staff, or telephone 024 7696 7290.

It is strongly recommended that you **stop smoking** completely whilst undergoing radiotherapy. Smoking makes treatment side effects more severe and the treatment harder to tolerate and less effective. For help to stop smoking call the national smoke free helpline: 0300 123 1044 or contact the hospital's Stop Smoking Service: 024 7696 4760

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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 8.00am to 4.00pm, the Centre is located on the ground floor of the main entrance.

Or call Macmillan's national helpline 0808 808 0000

Website www.macmillan.org.uk

Useful Telephone Numbers

Arden Cancer Centre – Monday to Friday 9.00am – 5.00pm: 024 7696 7272 for queries concerning appointments, parking and ambulance transport

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists:

Cancer and radiotherapy information and advice: 024 7696 7290

Monday – Friday 9.00 am – 5.00pm

Oncology Ward 35: 024 7696 5525 or 024 7696 5528 or 024 7696 5531
(Emergency advice only – 24 hours)

NHS advice – use the 111 service

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 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**.

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

This Trust operates a non-smoking policy on the hospital site. Please respect other patients and staff and refrain from smoking whilst visiting the hospital.

Document History

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