

Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy for skin cancer

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Introduction

This leaflet aims to help you understand more about radiotherapy treatment for skin cancer. You will have a treatment team of therapeutic radiographers, doctors and nurses to help and support you throughout your treatment. If you have any questions, please ask a member of your treatment team.

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is the use of high energy x-rays to destroy cancerous cells. It kills the cancer cells within the treatment area but allows your normal cells to recover. Its side effects are generally isolated to the area you are having treated.

In the skin, radiotherapy is mainly used to treat basal cell carcinomas and squamous cell carcinomas although patients with other conditions may also benefit from radiotherapy.

Basal cell carcinoma

This is the most common type of skin cancer. It is slow growing and generally does not spread to other parts of the body. However, it will not go away without some form of treatment, for example surgery, liquid nitrogen or radiotherapy.

Squamous cell carcinoma

After basal cell carcinoma, this is the next most common type of skin cancer. It is also usually slow growing but can spread to other parts of the body if left untreated.

Radiotherapy treatment

Your oncologist (cancer doctor) will decide the specific type and length of radiotherapy treatment. This will depend on the area of your body being treated. Radiotherapy is usually given over a period of days or weeks depending on the size and part of the body being treated.

Consent

We will explain the benefits and risks of treatment to you and ask you to sign a consent form. This is to confirm that you agree to have the radiotherapy treatment. If you have any further questions, please ask the radiographers at your first appointment when they ask you to confirm verbally that you have consented to radiotherapy.

Radiotherapy planning

Before you can start your radiotherapy, the treatment will be planned specifically for you. This will take place in the radiotherapy department at Charing Cross Hospital. The oncologist will use a bright light and magnifying glass to examine the area of skin affected by cancer on your body. If required, pen marks will be placed on your skin to outline the area(s) of treatment. If there is a scab on your skin cancer the doctor may need to remove it. The radiographer will record the treatment area by taking measurements and, with your consent, a photograph.

During treatment

Often, a thin layer of lead is used to shield the surrounding skin. It is not heavy and it will not hurt. Part of the radiotherapy machine may rest on your skin during treatment. You may feel a small amount of pressure on your skin because of this. The treatment takes a few minutes and is painless.

While the treatment is given the radiographer will leave the room but will watch you on closed circuit television. If you need help, raise your hand. The radiographer can stop the treatment at any time and return to the room to help you. During treatment it is important that you keep still but please breathe normally.

When your session ends, the radiographer will remove the skin marks. You will be given details of further appointments, if needed and advice on how to look after your skin.

Side effects during radiotherapy

Radiotherapy for skin cancer only affects the area treated. The treatment should not make you feel sick, tired or lose your hair, unless your skin cancer is in an area covered by hair. You should be able to continue your usual activities or work throughout your treatment.

The treated area of skin will become red and sore, as it does with sunburn. The area may become crusty and scab over, sometimes more than once. This skin reaction normally occurs in the later part of the treatment and may continue for some weeks afterwards.

Scarring from radiotherapy is usually mild but over the years the scar tends to become paler, and the skin may shrink/contract. If you wish to find further information on skin camouflage assistance for scarring the contact details of organisations that can help with this are at the end of this leaflet.

To help minimise the skin reaction it is important that you look after your skin during treatment and until your skin reaction has settled.

What can I do to keep my skin reaction to a minimum?

- maintain soft, clean and intact skin
- use warm water and mild soap to gently wash the treatment area, then pat dry, rather than rub every day

- ~~start applying a basic moisturiser within the treatment area at least twice a day, a few days before your radiotherapy treatment starts, if you are unsure what to use please speak to the radiotherapy treatment review team~~
- wear loose-fitting, cotton underwear and clothing to reduce friction
- continue to use your normal deodorant but stop if your skin becomes irritated or broken
- use a mild shampoo/baby shampoo if your scalp is in the treatment area (do not use a hairdryer)

Do not

- use perfumes, aftershaves, hair dye, make up or talcum powder on the treatment area as they can increase skin reactions
- sun exposure – cover the treated area from direct sunlight during treatment and until any skin reaction has settled (always take protective measures, such as applying sun cream), particularly if the treatment area is easily exposed to the sun)
- hot water bottles/ice packs, as direct application of extreme temperatures onto the treatment area is likely to cause skin irritation and delay healing
- you may go swimming if your skin is not blistered or peeling, it is best to shower immediately afterwards to wash off the chlorine and then apply a basic moisturising cream, please stop swimming if it irritates your skin or use wax, hair removal creams or adhesive tapes in the treatment area
- apply steroids on broken skin as this may delay the healing process
- apply antibiotics unless there is an infection
- use Vaseline® or creams that are paraffin-based as these may make the skin reaction worse
- use oils to moisturise the skin as these may make the skin reaction worse

Ask the radiotherapy treatment review team for further advice if:

- you are having treatment on your cheek or around your mouth and you get a reaction on the skin inside your mouth
- your skin becomes broken in the treatment area

If necessary, we will give you special dressings, instructions on how to use them and advise you on how to look after your skin.

What if I want someone to look at my skin?

Our treatment review team runs a skin review clinic every Wednesday from 08.30 – 17.00. If you want to be seen in this clinic, simply check in at the radiotherapy reception in Charing Cross Hospital - you don't need to make an appointment.

Follow-up appointment

You will have a follow-up appointment with either your oncologist or dermatologist approximately 12 weeks after your treatment has finished. If on your last day of treatment, you do not know when this appointment is, please ask the radiographers to confirm.

If you are concerned about the treated area at any time (particularly if it oozes pus or is painful) you should contact the radiotherapy review team.

Who can I contact for more help or information?

If you have any concerns about your skin following radiotherapy, then please contact the radiotherapy treatment review team. If no-one is available at the time of your phone call, please leave a message with a contact number and someone will get back to you.

Radiotherapy Treatment Review Team

Telephone **020 331 11737** (08.30-17:30, Monday to Friday)

Where can I get more information about radiotherapy?

Web links to detailed leaflets:

- Macmillan Cancer Support
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7UQ
Helpline (for emotional support): **0808 808 2020**
Helpline (for information): **0808 800 1234**
www.macmillan.org.uk

Link to patient support groups:

- British Association of Skin Camouflage (NHS and private practice)
Tel: **01254 703 107**
Email: info@skin-camouflage.net
Web: www.skin-camouflage.net
- Changing Faces
The Squire Centre
33-37 University Street
London, WC1E 6JN
Tel: **0300 012 0275** (for support and advice)
Tel: **0300 012 0276** (for the Skin Camouflage Service)
Email: skincam@changingfaces.org.uk
Web: www.changingfaces.org.uk

How to contact us

Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust has a **Macmillan navigator service**, which can answer questions on behalf of the relevant CNSs. Navigators, will also refer you to CNS teams and to other specialist clinical staff, as needed. The service is available Monday to Friday 08.30–16.30.

Telephone: **020 3313 0303**

Outside of these hours, please contact your GP or phone NHS 111.

Further sources of support and information

Macmillan Cancer Support Helpline: **0808 800 000** (Monday to Friday, 09.00-20.00)
www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Service at Charing Cross and Hammersmith hospitals

The information centre at Charing Cross Hospital and the Infopod at Hammersmith Hospital provide support, practical and signposting advice to anyone affected by cancer. These services are set in friendly, non-clinical environments in which people affected by cancer can discuss private and emotional needs.

The centre is located on the ground floor of Charing Cross Hospital. The Infopod is located on the ground floor of the Garry Weston Centre at Hammersmith Hospital.

Please note both the centre and Infopod are only operating a virtual service at the present time, appointments are available by telephone or video call. The team can be contacted on:

Email: imperial.macmillansupportservice@nhs.net

Message service: 020 3313 5170

Monday – Wednesday 8am – 6pm, Thursday 8am – 5.30pm

Maggie's Cancer Caring Centre

Maggie's is a cancer charity that provides the emotional, practical and social support that people with cancer may need. The centre combines striking buildings, calming spaces, professional experts offering professional support, and the ability to talk and share experiences with a community of people who have been through similar experiences. Designed by leading architects, Maggie's centres are warm, friendly and informal places full of light and open space with a big kitchen at their heart. Maggie's West London is in the grounds of Charing Cross Hospital but is independent of our hospital. The centre is open Monday to Friday, 09.00-17.00. For more information, please call **020 7386 1750**.

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at imperial.pals@nhs.net The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:
imperial.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: www.imperial.nhs.uk