Radiotherapy

Emergency radiotherapy: what to expect

Information for patients, relatives and carers

What is emergency radiotherapy?

We use emergency radiotherapy to treat and/or reduce the risk of the symptoms you are experiencing. This type of radiotherapy does not cure cancer.

Sometimes you need radiotherapy much more quickly than normal because of how your symptoms are affecting you. Ideally, we try to give emergency radiotherapy within 24 hours of your referral. This can be up to 48 hours in some situations, such as:

- if you have had radiotherapy before, so we need to do additional checks
- when we need to plan a more complex treatment
- when you need transport from another hospital

Types of oncology emergency

Metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC)
Spinal cord compression is when cancer cells grow in or near to the spine, and press on the spinal cord and nerves. This can cause swelling and reduced blood supply to the spinal cord and nerves. MSCC includes when the spinal cord isn't compressed yet but will be soon, and cauda equina syndrome, when there is compression at a lower section of the spinal cord.

The symptoms of spinal cord compression include:

- Back pain – the pain can feel like a 'band' around your chest or abdomen, and can sometimes radiate over the lower back, into your bottom or legs
- Numbness or 'pins and needles' in toes, fingers, or over your bottom
- Feeling unsteady on your feet, having difficulty walking, or your legs giving way
- Problems weeing (passing urine), which might include difficulty controlling your bladder, passing very little urine, or none at all
- Constipation or problems controlling when you poo (your bowels).

Superior vena cava obstruction (SVCO)
The superior vena cava (SVC) is a large vein that carries blood from the upper half of the body straight to the heart. A superior vena cava obstruction (SVCO) happens when something blocks the blood flow along the SVC. Obstructions can be because of blood clots, cancer cells, or nearby swelling, like swollen lymph nodes. Because the walls of the SVC are thin, they can easily become squashed (compressed).

Symptoms of SVCO are caused by the blood flow to the heart being blocked, which causes increased pressure in the head, neck and arms. Symptoms can develop quickly over a few days

or over a few weeks. The first symptom is usually feeling a fullness in your face when you bend over. Other common symptoms include:

- breathlessness
- headaches
- facial swelling, with changes to your complexion
- changes to eyesight
- swollen neck, or arms and hands
- visible swollen blue veins on the chest
- feeling dizzy

Uncontrolled tumour bleeding
Some cancers are more prone to bleeding, for example those in the stomach, the food pipe (oesophagus), or bladder. Certain types of cancer treatment can also increase the risk of bleeding.

What to expect

Referral and consent:
Your medical team might need to do some more tests, for example, an MRI or CT scan. These scans give us images of the inside of your body. They might also talk to various different teams to ensure you receive the most appropriate treatment.

We want to involve you in decisions about your care and treatment and your medical team will talk to you about the treatment options. If you decide to go ahead with emergency radiotherapy they will ask you to sign a consent form. This says you agree to have the treatment and understand what it involves. The medical team will then refer you to the radiotherapy department.

Once we receive your referral, our radiotherapy team will book a CT scan for you. We use this scan to plan your radiotherapy treatment. We aim to give you the earliest available appointment that same day, but this may be later in the day if we need to arrange transport for you.

Radiotherapy planning CT scan:
We will do a CT scan with you lying in a position where you are comfortable, so that we can deliver your treatment safely and accurately. The radiographers will tell you what to expect, do the CT scan, and will make small tattoo-like marks on your skin to help line up the area for treatment.

The CT scan appointment takes around 30 minutes in total. The next part of the process involves planning your radiotherapy based on the CT scan, and this can take some time.
If you are to have your treatment the same day, we might ask you to wait in the department, or send you back to the ward if you are an inpatient. If your treatment is the next day, we'll send you home, or back to the ward if you are an inpatient. We'll give you an appointment time for the next day.

Planning your radiotherapy:
We use the CT scan to see where the cancer is, what area(s) we want to target and any area(s) we need to avoid. If you've had radiotherapy before in a similar area, we need to review your previous plan(s) to make sure your new radiotherapy plan doesn't overlap with an old one.

Sometimes, we need to create a more complex radiotherapy plan. This might be because of previous radiotherapy treatment, the location of your cancer, or the type of radiotherapy you're having.

Radiotherapy plans go through detailed checking processes by the doctor, and the radiotherapy teams, to make sure that your treatment is suitable, accurate, and safe. The planning and checking processes can take several hours.

Delivering your radiotherapy:
The radiotherapy team will tell you what to expect from your treatment, and any side effects to be aware of. They will talk to you about your consent form to check you are still happy to have the treatment, and answer any questions you have.

The radiographers will take you into the treatment room where the radiotherapy machine is, and position you on the treatment couch in the same position you were in for your planning CT scan. They will tell when they are about the leave the room, and how to signal to them if you need help. They will be watching you on CCTV cameras.

The radiotherapy machine will move around you. It might come close to you, but it won't touch you. The radiographers will take some x-ray images first to make sure you are in the correct position for treatment, and the treatment couch might move slightly if they need to improve your position. They might come back and re-position you.

Once you are in the correct position for treatment, the machine will deliver the radiotherapy. You won't feel anything, but the machine does make some low-level noise. The treatment can take around 30 minutes, but it might be longer if you have more than one area that requires treatment.

When the treatment has finished, the radiographers will come back into the treatment room. They'll make sure the radiotherapy machine is in a safe position before helping you off the treatment couch. If you need more than one treatment session, we'll tell you when your next appointment is. If you only need one treatment session, we'll give you a treatment summary letter.

Preparation: on the day of your appointment

You might need to wait for several hours between your radiotherapy planning CT scan and your treatment. If you need support with medication, pain control, access to refreshments or anything while you wait, please ask a member of our team.

If you are having treatment to the abdominal area, we might give you some anti-sickness medication. This is to prevent potential nausea and vomiting due to the radiotherapy.

After treatment has finished

Radiotherapy can cause swelling in the area you had radiotherapy (localised swelling). This means your symptoms might feel worse before they improve. This is completely normal and can last a few days, but if you're worried, speak to your medical team.

You might also feel more tired than normal, and this fatigue can last a few days. Drink plenty of fluids such as water, squash, juice, and avoid alcohol, as dehydration can make your tiredness worse.

Useful numbers

General enquiries:	020 331 11737	(09.00 – 17.00 Monday to Friday)
Appointment enquiries:	020 331 11612	(09.00 – 17.00 Monday to Friday)
Appointment enquiries e-mail:	**imperial.radiotherapybookings@nhs.net**	
Transport enquiries:	033 067 81245	(09.00 – 17.00 Monday to Friday)

Further sources of support and information

Macmillan cancer navigator service at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust
This is a single point of contact for cancer patients at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, and their family, friends and carers. The service is here to help you to navigate your care and resolve queries that you may have. Our Navigators can access information about your appointments, connect you to appropriate services and signpost you on to further support. They can also book you in for a telephone call back from your Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) if you have a question that needs clinical input.
The service is open Monday to Friday 08:30 to 16:30 excluding bank holidays. (The service is closed for training between 14.00-14.45 on Thursdays.)
Call: **020 3313 0303**

Macmillan cancer information and support service at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust
The Macmillan cancer information and support service offers free support and information to anyone affected by cancer, including family and loved ones. The service has physical centres at Charing Cross and Hammersmith Hospitals, and also offers virtual and telephone support. When you call or visit you can speak to one of the Macmillan cancer team one-on-one about whatever matters most to you. You can sign up to a range of weekly virtual groups that provide the opportunity to connect with other people with cancer in a relaxed environment. You can also speak to our Macmillan welfare and benefits adviser, who can offer patients of the Trust tailored advice on additional financial support.
The service is open Monday-Thursday (excluding bank holidays,) with various drop-ins available within our physical centres. For more information please call us on **020 3313 5170** or email **imperial.macmillansupportservice@nhs.net**

Maggie's West London
Maggie's is a cancer charity that provides the emotional, practical and social support to people with cancer and their family and friends.
The centre offers a calming and beautiful space, a professional team of support staff, and the opportunity to talk and share with a community of people who have been through cancer too.

Maggie's centres are warm, friendly and informal places full of light and open space, with a big kitchen table at the heart of the building. Maggie's West London is located in the grounds of Charing Cross Hospital but is independent of our hospital.
For more information on getting started on Radiotherapy please drop in or call: **020 7386 1750**
The centre is open Monday – Friday 09.00 – 17.00.

Macmillan Support Line
The Macmillan Support Line offers confidential support to people living with cancer and their loved ones. This support line is a national line provided by Macmillan and is independent of our hospital. The Support Line is open every day, 08:00 to 20:00. Please call: **0808 808 000** or visit www.macmillan.org.uk

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 3312 7777** (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). 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 is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: www.imperial.nhs.uk

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