



Radiotherapy to the skin

A guide for patients and their carers



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Christie website

For more information about The Christie and our services, please visit **www.christie.nhs.uk** or visit the cancer information centre at Withington, Oldham or Salford.

Introduction

This booklet is to tell you about radiotherapy to the skin. The Christie is a specialised radiotherapy centre, patients come for treatments that are not available in general hospitals.

Please share this booklet with your family and friends. It is important that they feel well-informed and understand what is happening. Families and carers can have a role in helping you. If you would like more detailed information about your own treatment, please ask the staff.

Contact numbers

| | |
|---|----------------------|
| ■ The Christie in Withington | |
| Switchboard | 0161 446 3000 |
| Radiotherapy department | 0161 446 3485 |
| Superficial treatment machine (9am to 12 noon) | 0161 446 8128 |
| ■ The Christie at Oldham | 0161 918 7700 |
| ■ The Christie at Salford | 0161 918 7800 |

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is the use of exact carefully measured doses of radiation to treat disease. Therapy radiographers operate the radiotherapy machines. They are specially trained health care professionals who are involved in radiotherapy planning, treatment and care.

How does radiotherapy work?

Our bodies are made up of cells and all cells have the capacity to divide. If radiation hits a cell that is dividing, the cell will be damaged. Cancer cells are much less able than normal cells to repair the damage, so more of the cancer cells will be destroyed.



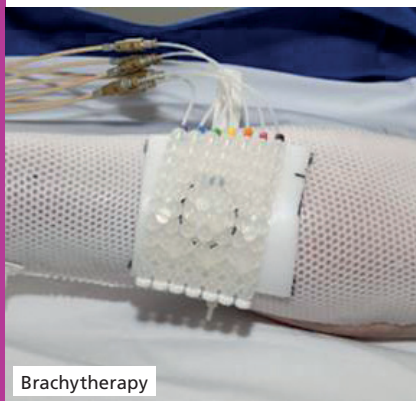
There are different types of radiotherapy used in the treatment of skin cancer: superficial, electron and brachytherapy. Photon radiotherapy may also be used in some cases, for example to treat lymph nodes.

Superficial radiotherapy uses X-rays that do not travel far into the skin before they are absorbed.



Electron radiotherapy uses electron beams that can travel deeper into the skin and underlying tissues.

During **brachytherapy**, the radioactive source is placed directly over the skin cancer in a specially designed plastic treatment mould.



Your doctor will advise you about the type of treatment that is appropriate for you and how long the treatment lasts. All superficial and brachytherapy treatments are given at The Christie in Withington. Electron treatment is also given at Withington and it may be possible to have this treatment at The Christie at Oldham or Salford.

Agreeing to treatment

Consent to treatment

The doctors, nurses and radiographers will give you some written information to support what they have said about your treatment. At the time your treatment is being planned, you will have a further opportunity to discuss anything that you do not understand or any anxieties you may have.

We will ask you to sign a consent form agreeing to the treatment that you are being offered. The basis of the agreement is that you have had The Christie's written description of the proposed treatment, and that you have been given an opportunity to discuss any concerns.

You are entitled to request a second opinion from another doctor who specialises in treating this cancer. You can ask your own consultant or your GP to refer you. Your consent may be withdrawn at any time before or during this treatment. Should you decide to withdraw your consent then a member of your treating team will discuss the possible consequences with you.

Radiation can be harmful to the unborn child. It is important to let the radiographers know if you have missed a period or suspect that you might be pregnant before you are exposed to any radiation.

What are the benefits of this treatment?

Radiotherapy works by damaging cancer cells while causing as little damage as possible to normal cells. The benefits of treatment vary from one person to another depending on your disease. The aims of treatment may include an attempt to:

- cure the cancer
- or reduce the chances of the cancer coming back, such as after surgery
- or shrink the tumour which may slow down its progress and give relief from troublesome symptoms.

Are there any alternatives to this treatment?

The doctor at your local hospital may have advised you about any other possible treatments before referring you to The Christie. Your Christie consultant will be happy to discuss any questions or concerns you may still have.

What will happen if I do not have this treatment?

There is a risk that your cancer may continue to grow and your symptoms may get worse. You can discuss what to do next with your doctor.

Preparation for treatment

A team of doctors including consultants and registrars as well as radiographers will care for you. This team will not necessarily include the doctor who saw you first of all, but one consultant will be responsible for your treatment.



Your doctor will advise you which radiotherapy treatment (superficial, electron or brachytherapy) is appropriate for you. This depends on the size, site and depth of skin that needs treatment and we will explain this to you before treatment begins. In addition, your doctor will mark out the area on your skin that needs treatment.

Superficial treatment

You will need to wait for half an hour to an hour for the treatment to be calculated. You will usually be treated on the same day as planning.

Superficial treatment may be done in one visit or sometimes multiple visits are necessary.

If your treatment is near the eye you may need to wear a protective contact lens. This will be inserted after using local anaesthetic eye drops. The eye will need to be covered for at least four hours afterwards. In these circumstances it is best not to drive yourself to the hospital.

Electron treatment

The treatment is given over the course of a few days and you may not start your treatment on the same day as planning.

Brachytherapy treatment

The treatment is given over the course of a few days (sometimes more than once per day) and will start usually within 2 weeks of planning. Planning will involve a CT scan.

Mould room preparation

Some patients may need to have an individual shield made for them. This may apply to patients having electron or superficial treatment. This will involve an outpatient visit to the mould room at The Christie in Withington one week before starting radiotherapy.



Patients having brachytherapy will have an individual mould made of the treatment area. Another appointment will be made following this to attend for a CT scan, which is to plan the brachytherapy treatment. Treatment will usually start about one week after this scan.

What happens when you have superficial, electron or brachytherapy treatment?

On the day of treatment, you will come to the radiotherapy department.

Radiographers operate the radiotherapy machines to give you the precise treatment prescribed by the doctor. They will explain to you what is going to happen and take you into the treatment room. The radiographers will ask you to remove any clothing that covers the area being treated. The radiographer will adjust both the bed and the machine to the exact positions that are needed. The machine will rest gently on your skin. You will be asked to keep as still as possible.



The treatment is absolutely painless. It is just like having an X-ray taken, but it takes slightly longer.

When all the adjustments have been made, the radiographers will leave the room and will switch on the machine from outside.

The treatment itself normally lasts less than 5 minutes. However, the treatment session may take about 15 minutes, allowing time for discussion and the machine to be set up.

During your treatment you will be alone in the room, but the radiographers will be watching you carefully on a closed

circuit television system. If for any reason you need them, just raise your hand and they will interrupt the treatment and come in to you immediately. Afterwards, the treatment will continue as planned.

Treatment schedule

The prescribed radiation dose and the number of days over which it is given varies between patients. Some people may only need one treatment but if your doctor prescribes more than one treatment, we will give you an appointment to attend the following day. There is usually no radiotherapy treatment on Saturdays and Sundays, and this is taken into account when your treatment is planned. Sometimes treatment is given on bank holidays. You will usually be treated on the same machine throughout your course of radiotherapy. Do not worry if you are asked to move to another machine as your treatment will remain the same.

If you have any questions about what will happen during your treatment, please call the radiotherapy department on **0161 446 3485**.

It is very important that you do not miss treatment days as it may make your treatment less effective. If you feel you are unable to attend for any reason, please call and discuss the problem with a radiographer. The contact numbers are at the front of this booklet.

Some questions you may have

Will radiotherapy hurt?

No. You will feel no pain at all while you are actually having your treatment. As your treatment progresses it will cause inflammation possibly resulting in some soreness around the area being treated.

Is it safe?

Radiation used in medical treatment is given in controlled, carefully measured doses. The aim is to include all tissues that could possibly contain cancer cells whilst minimising the dose to the normal tissue.

Will I be radioactive?

No. Patients treated by X-rays do not become radioactive. The radiation does not stay in your body after treatment, so you cannot do anyone else any harm. It is safe for you to mix with other people including children and pregnant women.

I already have problems with my health. Will radiotherapy treatment make them worse?

Not usually. The treatment may make you feel more tired than normal. Please tell your treatment team about any existing medical conditions and continue with any medication that you may be taking unless your doctor or nurse tell you otherwise. Ask your Christie doctor if you are worried about any other health problems.

Can I come for treatment at any time of the day?

If you are having treatment as an outpatient, the radiographers will give you an appointment time for your next treatment when you attend for your first session. After that you can arrange with your treating team a mutually convenient time. Please try and be as flexible as possible and give priority to your treatment sessions over other general appointments. If you need a specific time with valid reasons, please give the radiographers at least 48 hours notice. The time we give you may vary half an hour either way each day due to emergencies. Please check your appointment time for the following day before you leave, in case of any changes.

The superficial treatment machine at Withington only operates in the mornings, so we will give you an

appointment before 12pm. If you need ambulance transport, please speak to us about arranging a suitable time for booking. Treatment with electrons and brachytherapy takes place in the morning and afternoon.

If you have more than 5 treatments, you will meet your consultant or one of their team each week to check that you are coping with the side effects of your treatment. We will take you to the clinic before or after your radiotherapy.

Will I be treated as an outpatient or an inpatient?

You will usually have your treatment as an outpatient. Some people continue to work during part of their treatment. However, after daily travel and treatment, you may feel tired and need to rest.

Your doctor will have discussed with you about travelling daily for your treatment as an outpatient. However, if you do become unwell during your treatment we may need to admit you as an inpatient to support you through your radiotherapy. You may be admitted to your local hospital or to The Christie. You will not have to stay in bed so take suitable day wear. Treatment usually takes up only a small part of the day and, if you are well enough, you may be able to go out – check with the ward staff first.

What happens if I need ambulance transport to and from the hospital?

Many patients are able to bring themselves or can ask a friend or relative to help them out. If you think you may need ambulance transport, please discuss this with a radiotherapy support worker or radiographer on your first visit to the radiotherapy department. Ambulance transport can be arranged subject to eligibility criteria based on medical need. There also needs to be a medical need for you to bring an escort on hospital transport.

There can be delays for some time either side of your appointment because of the high demand for transport. Please take this into account when you are deciding whether to use ambulance transport or not.

Hospital transport is provided by several different ambulance services. Contact the transport liaison office at The Christie directly on **0161 446 8114** or **8143** for advice and bookings (Monday – Friday, 8.00am – 6.00pm). Patients attending The Christie at Salford can contact **0161 918 7800** and patients attending The Christie at Oldham can contact **0161 918 7700** for advice about transport.

Side effects of treatment

These side effects are temporary and affect all patients. Remember, only the area being treated, called the treatment field, will be affected.

- The area will become very red, sore and itchy in the next 5 to 10 days. If your treatment is short and completed within 1-2 weeks, it may happen after you have finished the treatment.
- The area may scab and a new scab may form in its place. This process may be repeated several times before healing is complete.
- There may be some bleeding.
- The area may take 6 to 8 weeks or more to heal.

Advice for care of your skin during and after treatment

- It is best not to cover with a bandage or plaster. If the area is bleeding, weeping or unsightly, cover with a non-adhesive foam dressing suitable for wet wounds. Do not put sticking plaster on the treated area. If you have any worries about your skin reaction, we may suggest that you contact your GP.

- If you suspect you have a skin infection (greenish / yellowish discharge, which may be heavy at times), please see your GP.
- Try to keep the treated area dry. If it does get wet do not worry. Do not rub the area, but dry it by patting gently with a soft towel.
- If the beard area is being treated, do not wet shave in the treated area. It is best to use an electric razor.
- If the scalp is being treated, wash hair with a mild shampoo such as baby shampoo. Allow hair to dry naturally. Do not use a hairdryer.
- You can use any unperfumed moisturising cream, as long as the skin is dry.
- Do not apply ointment, powder or lotions to skin that is weeping – unless hospital staff or your GP advise you to do so.
- There is a Christie leaflet on ‘Skin care during and after your radiotherapy treatment’. Please ask your radiographer for a copy or visit the cancer information centre.

Possible late effects

There are some possible late side effects which your doctor will discuss with you. They depend on the area being treated. These can occur months or even years after treatment.

- The treated area will be paler than the surrounding skin.
- Small veins may appear in the treated area.
- You may lose your hair permanently in the treated area.
- On rare occasions an ulcer may form and will require long-term dressing or a small operation to remove it.

After the treatment

Your side effects may last for some weeks after the treatment finishes. Contact The Christie if you have any concerns about new problems or side effects. See page 3 for contact numbers or refer to your discharge note, if you are given one at the end of your treatment.

Your follow-up outpatient appointment will usually be about 8 - 12 weeks after your last treatment and will normally be in the outpatient department at The Christie or your local hospital. This might seem a long time, but the radiotherapy reaction takes a few weeks to settle down and the doctors cannot see how effective the treatment has been until then. If you have not received your appointment letter 2 - 3 weeks after completion of your treatment, please contact your Christie consultant via The Christie switchboard on **0161 446 3000**.

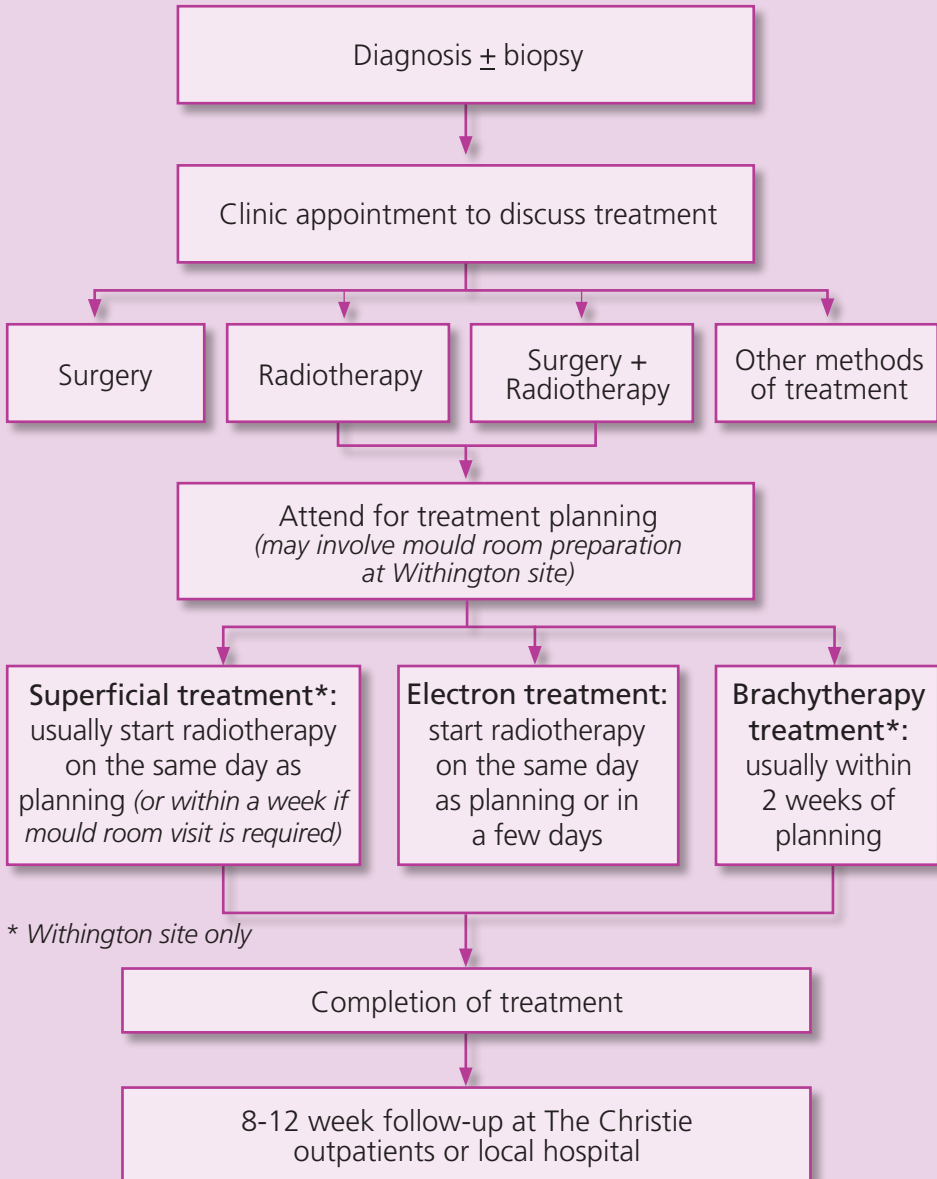
Some patients ask about 'warning' signs they should look for once the treatment has been completed. You should ask the doctor or radiographer to discuss this with you. Of course, if you are worried about anything you feel may be related to the cancer or the treatment, please contact us and, if necessary, we can arrange an earlier outpatient appointment for you.

Take care in the sun and make sure you do not get sunburn in the treated area.

It is sometimes possible to use special covering creams to disguise visible skin problems resulting from treatment. Please ask your consultant or GP for a referral if you would like this service.

Patient journey for radiotherapy to the skin

The chart below shows the patient journey from diagnosis to radiotherapy



* Withington site only

Appointments

Once you are having treatment, if you have a problem with your appointment time, please contact the radiotherapy department where you are having treatment: The Christie in Withington on **0161 446 3485**, The Christie at Oldham on **0161 918 7700** or The Christie at Salford on **0161 918 7800** as soon as possible. It is helpful if you can quote your hospital number – it will be on your appointment card or letter.

If you change your address, please let the health records department staff know your new address, and the address of your new family doctor on **0161 446 3346** or **3347**.

Prescriptions

NHS patients treated for cancer are entitled to free prescriptions. You will need an exemption certificate. They are available from The Christie Pharmacy or from your GP.

Car parking

The Christie at Oldham and Salford have designated areas for free parking for radiotherapy patients whilst on treatment. It is accessible by code entry that is provided at your first appointment within the unit.

For parking at the main Withington site, please check the website (www.christie.nhs.uk) for the latest details, or ask at the information centre for a copy of the leaflet 'Travelling and car parking for patients and patient's visitors to The Christie'.

Further information

Macmillan Cancer Support

This is a national charity which runs a cancer information service. The cancer support service freephone number is

0808 808 00 00. (Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm). If you are hard of hearing, use the textphone **0808 808 0121**. If you are a non-English speaker, interpreters are available. Specially trained cancer nurses can give you information on all aspects of cancer and its treatment. Information and advice about finance and benefits are also available.

Macmillan Cancer Support publish booklets which are free to patients, their families and carers. You can get a copy by ringing the freephone number. The information is on their website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Information is available on cancer treatments – such as Understanding radiotherapy and Understanding chemotherapy. There are also booklets on living with cancer – some of these are listed below:

- Talking about your cancer
- Talking to children and teenagers when an adult has cancer
- Cancer and complementary therapies
- Travel and cancer

The cancer information centres offer information, advice and support. The centres have a full range of booklets free to patients and their relatives or carers. There are information centres at The Christie in Withington, Salford and Oldham.

Cancer information in your language

If English is not your first language, you can speak to a nurse at Cancer Research UK through a qualified interpreter. The service is free and over 170 languages are available on **0808 800 4040**.

Christie information

The Christie produces a range of patient information booklets which are free to patients coming to The Christie. If you would like a copy, please ask the ward staff. If you are an outpatient, please ask your nurse, doctor or radiographer. There is also a film about radiotherapy available to watch on The Christie website: www.christie.nhs.uk

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

Benefits and finance

You may have had to stop work and had a reduction in your income. You may be able to get benefits or other financial help.

Personal Independence Payment (PIP) is a social security benefit and has replaced Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for new claimants. It's for people who need help either because of their disability or their illness. You can apply for DLA if you are under 16.

If you are State pension age or older and need help with personal care or supervision, you could be entitled to Attendance Allowance. Your carer could get Carer's Allowance if you have substantial caring needs. Find out more today:

- To get a claim pack for Attendance Allowance, call **0345 605 6055** and for PIP call **0800 917 2222**.
- Carer's Allowance: call **0345 608 4321**.
- For benefits advice, contact Maggie's centre on **0161 641 4848** or email manchester@maggiescentres.org

The Christie at Oldham has a benefits advice session on Thursday afternoons, call **0161 918 7745**.

- Contact your local social services department for help with equipment and adaptations, or for an assessment of care needs. Visit **www.gov.uk** for further information.
- Macmillan Cancer Support can give advice on helping with the cost of cancer on **0808 808 00 00** or **www.macmillan.org.uk**

Student training

The Christie is a training centre for postgraduate and undergraduate trainees so you may meet students in all areas of the hospital. We train doctors, nurses, radiographers and other therapists in the treatment and care of cancer patients. Placements at The Christie are an important part of student training, so by allowing them to assist in your care, you will be making a valuable contribution to student education.

Students are always supervised by fully qualified staff. However, you have the right to decide if students can take part in your care. If you prefer them not to, please tell the doctor, nurse, radiographer or other therapist in charge as soon as possible. You have a right to do this and your treatment will not be affected in any way.

We also try to respect the concerns of patients in relation to the gender of their doctor and other health professionals.

The Christie is committed to producing high quality, evidence based information for patients. Our patient information adheres to the principles and quality statements of the Information Standard.

If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact **the-christie.patient.information@nhs.net**

The Christie would like to acknowledge the help received from Independent Cancer Patients' Voice (ICPV) in updating this booklet.

Contact The Christie Hotline for
urgent support and specialist advice

The Christie Hotline: 0161 446 3658

Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Visit the Cancer Information Centre

The Christie at Withington **0161 446 8100**

The Christie at Oldham **0161 918 7745**

The Christie at Salford **0161 918 7804**

Open Monday to Friday, 10am – 4pm.

Opening times can vary, please ring to check
before making a special journey.

The Christie NHS Foundation Trust

Wilmslow Road
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0161 446 3000

www.christie.nhs.uk



The Christie Patient Information Service
July 2020 – Review July 2023

CHR/XRT/401/03.05.05 Version 5