Radiotherapy to the oesophagus
A guide for patients and their carers

We care, we discover, we teach
Contents

Introduction ..................................................... 1
What is radiotherapy? ................................. 1
How does radiotherapy work? ................... 1
When will radiotherapy begin? ....................... 2
Agreeing to treatment ....................................... 2
Planning the treatment .................................... 4
What happens during treatment? .................. 4
Some questions you may have ...................... 7
Prescriptions ...................................................... 9
Can I expect any side effects? ...................... 10
What you can do to help .......................... 13
After treatment ends .................................. 15
Further information ..................................... 16
Christie information ..................................... 17
Benefits and financial information .............. 19
Student training ........................................... 20

© 2015 The Christie NHS Foundation Trust. This document may be copied for use within the NHS only on the condition that The Christie NHS Foundation Trust is acknowledged as the creator.
Introduction
This booklet is to tell you about radiotherapy to the oesophagus. The Christie is a specialised centre for radiotherapy and patients come for treatments that are not always available at general hospitals. You may have heard about radiotherapy from people you know or from the patients at The Christie. Remember that their information may not apply to you.

What is radiotherapy?
Radiotherapy uses exact, carefully measured doses of radiation to treat diseases. It is often given in small doses over a specified period of days or weeks, but may be given in a single treatment. It is given by therapy radiographers who operate the machines which direct high-energy rays to the precise area needing treatment. The radiographers are specially trained professional men and women. They will be able to answer any questions or concerns you may have.

How does radiotherapy work?
Our bodies are made up of cells and all cells are able 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.
When will radiotherapy begin?

During your initial radiotherapy planning appointment, the radiographers will be able to tell you exactly when you will start your treatment. As everybody’s treatment varies the amount of time needed to plan the treatment varies. You may have up to 20 treatments.

The specialist doctor who is in charge of your treatment is a clinical oncologist. A team of doctors, radiographers and nurses will care for you. This team may not necessarily include the doctor who saw you first but a named consultant will be responsible for your treatment.

In choosing your treatment, your clinical oncologist at The Christie has carefully considered the nature of your illness and your particular needs with regard to your treatment plan.

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 accept 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 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 treatment?**
Radiotherapy works by damaging cancer cells while causing as little damage as possible to normal cells. The benefits of having radiotherapy for oesophageal cancer are to try to shrink the cancer with the aim of improving or preventing symptoms from it, and delaying further growth of the tumour. Occasionally radiotherapy will destroy the cancer. The aim of treatment will be different for each person and your doctor will have discussed this with you.

**Are there any alternatives to this treatment?**
There are alternative treatments available including surgery and chemotherapy. Not all of these options are suitable for everybody but all possibilities will be discussed with you by your doctor. Your doctor will have also discussed with you what would happen if you had no treatment.

**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.
Planning the treatment

Treatment preparation is undertaken using a RTP (radiotherapy planning) scanner which provides the doctors with images from which your treatment is planned. The scan and images are not used for diagnostic purposes. If your radiotherapy needs to extend into your upper chest or lower neck area, you may need to have a plastic shell made to fit your upper body. This is used to immobilise you when you are having treatment. The planning is very important and can take up to a few weeks to complete.

During this planning session the radiographers will draw some marks on your chest with a skin pen. These marks do wash off and so some permanent marks or tattoos, like small black freckles, will need to be made. These will help the radiographers set you up in the correct position for treatment every day.

What happens during treatment?

On the day of your first treatment, you will come to the radiotherapy department. If you are an inpatient, a male or female radiotherapy care assistant may collect you from your ward and escort you to the department. On the treatment unit you will meet a radiotherapy support worker. They help patients plan their appointments for the treatment.
The radiographers will have the details of your treatment which the doctor has carefully planned. They will explain to you exactly what will happen. The Christie is a training centre, so you may meet male and female students in the radiotherapy department who may be involved in the delivery of your treatment. If you have any objections let the radiographers know.

The radiographers will discuss the treatment with you and how to minimise the side effects. They will also check whether you are still happy to go ahead with your treatment. This is the ideal opportunity to ask any questions you may have.

The radiographers will take you into the treatment room and ask you to remove your upper clothes so that they can see the marks made during treatment planning. They will help you onto the treatment bed. The radiographers will then adjust the bed and your position so that you are in the correct position for the treatment. They will try to make you as comfortable as possible as you will be asked to keep still for the duration of the treatment.

The radiotherapy machines are quite large and you may find them a little frightening to begin with, but there is no need to worry – the treatment is painless. Each session may take about 15 minutes but the actual treatment only lasts a few minutes. The radiographers operate the machines from outside the room. When all the adjustments have been made
and you are in exactly the right position, the radiographers will make sure you are alright and then leave the room to switch the machine on. Please do not feel abandoned. A closed circuit television on the control desk gives the radiographers a clear view of you and they will be watching you all the time. If you feel you need to cough or sneeze the radiographers will tell you beforehand how to let them know this. They will switch off the machine and come in immediately. The machines make a buzzing noise when they are giving treatment but there is nothing to feel and nothing to see.

During your treatment the radiographers will need to take images of the area you are having treated. This will be done at the same time as your treatment and you probably will not notice that the images have been taken. Some machines have the ability to complete a scan of the treatment area. All of these images taken are purely to check that you are in the correct position and not to check how the tumour is responding to treatment.

Once your treatment has finished they will help you off the bed and arrange your next visit. You can then return home or to your ward. It is very important that you do not miss treatment days as this may make your treatment less effective. If you feel you are unable to attend for any reason please telephone the staff on your treatment machine and discuss the problem with a radiographer.
Some questions you may have…

**Will it hurt?**
No. You will feel no pain at all while you are actually having your treatment.

**Will I lose my hair?**
You will not lose any hair on your head as a result of radiotherapy. However, you may lose some hair in the area being treated during and after treatment – some men may lose hair on their chest – although this usually starts to grow back some time after treatment is finished.

**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 while minimizing 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 and to have visitors if you are on the wards.

**I already have problems with my general 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 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 the first treatment when you attend for your planning session. After that you can arrange with your treating team the time that suits you and the machine. Please try and be as flexible as possible and give priority to your treatment sessions over other general appointments. The time you prefer may not be available at the start of your treatment because of the large numbers of patients on the unit. 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 slightly each day due to emergencies and so on. Each day, we will give you an appointment time for the following day.

Once a week, you will meet your consultant or one of their team. You do not need an appointment for this. We will take you to the clinic before or after your radiotherapy treatment. If you are coming by ambulance transport we will give you a morning or afternoon appointment to fit in with your consultant’s clinic.

If you are an inpatient, the treating team will send a care assistant for you when they have a free slot. If you are going on weekend leave, please let the staff know and they will do their best to treat you before lunch, although this is not always possible.

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 the need for travelling daily for your treatment as an outpatient.
However, if you become unwell during your treatment we will usually admit you as an inpatient to support you through your radiotherapy. You will not have to stay in bed so bring suitable day wear such as tops and skirts or trousers. 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 North West Ambulance Service and Arriva; however, you can contact the transport liaison office at The Christie directly on 0161 446 8114 or 8143 for advice.

**Prescriptions**

Prescriptions from The Christie pharmacy are free for NHS patients. You will need an exemption certificate to get free prescriptions from a community pharmacy. Exemption certificates are available from the pharmacy and benefits advisers at The Christie and from your GP.
Can I expect any side effects?

Side effects from radiotherapy vary between people and depend on which part of your body is being treated and the number of treatments you are having. People who have had similar treatments can often have different side effects.

**Early side effects**

If you develop early side effects of the treatment, they tend to appear halfway through your treatment. These normally continue after the treatment has finished but they should gradually fade 4 to 6 weeks after. This can vary according to the individual.

**Tiredness**

Tiredness is one of the most common side effects of radiotherapy. Some people describe feelings of extreme fatigue, although some continue to work and carry out busy lives as normal. You can help yourself by taking time to rest and relax before you get tired. Do not be afraid of asking family and friends for help. Some patients find that it helps to have a short rest each day after having their treatment.

**Difficulty in swallowing**

The lining of the gullet becomes irritated during the treatment. This side effect gradually builds up during the course of treatment. You may feel as if you have a lump in your throat when you swallow. Cool drinks or ice-cream and jellies might help. It is advisable not to take hot drinks or eat spicy food. You may need a soft or liquidised diet temporarily. Ask the staff for a copy of ‘Advice about soft and liquidised foods’ which has helpful tips about a soft diet. Your doctor or nurse clinician may sometimes prescribe soothing medication such as liquid paracetamol mixture (only from The Christie pharmacy) or sucralfate, so
let us know as soon as swallowing becomes difficult. There is a very small risk of damage to the gullet leading to an ulcer or hole which may need surgery.

Occasionally, if you cannot swallow at all, a temporary feeding tube will need to be inserted. Sometimes this is a fine tube down the throat (known as a nasogastric or ‘NG’ tube), or sometimes through the skin of the abdomen into the stomach (known as a PEG or a RIG tube). You may have to stay as an inpatient in hospital to have a tube inserted into the stomach. Sometimes, particularly if swallowing is very difficult before treatment, we recommend that a RIG or PEG tube is inserted before treatment starts.

**Shortness of breath**
Radiotherapy can make you feel more breathless because of inflammation in the lungs. Please let your radiographer and Christie doctor know if this happens. We may prescribe some medication for this. In rare circumstances, this may need urgent assessment and could become life-threatening without any treatment. You should ring the Christie Hotline if you are concerned.

**Nausea or vomiting**
Radiotherapy can cause you to feel nauseous (sickly), particularly if the lower part of your oesophagus is being treated. If this is the case, we will prescribe anti-sickness medication to take before your radiotherapy.

**Skin reactions**
The extent of a skin reaction will vary for each person. You may notice that your skin in the area being treated becomes more sensitive. Occasionally the area can become slightly pink, warm, itchy, dry and feel tighter than usual.
Late side effects
It is possible for some types of reaction to occur months or years after the treatment has finished, although this is less common these days because of recent improvements in treatment. Your doctor at The Christie will discuss any possible late effects with you if they are at all likely to occur.

Difficulty in swallowing
If you experience swallowing difficulties months after completing your treatment you may need further investigations as sometimes radiotherapy causes narrowing of the gullet (stricture) due to the development of a scar. A minor procedure to stretch the gullet might be needed and this may have to be done on successive occasions. This does not mean that your cancer has come back.

On rare occasions, scarring of the gullet can be severe leading to an ulcer which is slow to heal or even a tear (perforation). If this were to happen, surgery may be needed and you would be counselled about this accordingly. Your treating doctor may also mention the rare occurrence of a hole developing between your gullet and airway (fistula) which may be irreversible and require insertion of a plastic tube (stent).

Breathlessness or cough
Radiotherapy may leave the lungs with some scarring (fibrosis). This can mean that your lung doesn’t work quite as well as it did before, and you may notice a slight increase in breathlessness or a cough. If this happens, make an appointment to see your GP or Christie doctor. It may be possible to learn breathing exercises or use medicine that will help reduce your breathlessness, but in some rare cases the breathing deterioration can be irreversible.
**Bone weakness**
Rarely, radiotherapy can make some of the ribs more brittle. After a severe cough or mild trauma this can result in chest pain and/or a minor rib fracture.

**Spinal cord damage**
In extremely rare cases, radiotherapy may lead to injury to the spinal cord which can cause permanent difficulties in walking and loss of sensation in the lower body. Every effort is made to carefully plan your treatment to avoid this.

What you can do to help...

**Tiredness**
- Try to maintain a normal sleeping routine and don’t feel that you must do everything that you normally do. Ask your family and friends for help. It is a good rule of thumb to listen to what your body is telling you, and if you feel tired then rest.

  - For people in good general health, it may be beneficial to do some gentle exercise such as walking. There is a Christie booklet and DVD about exercise ‘Be Active, Stay Active’ which you may find helpful. Please ask your nurse or radiographer for a copy or visit the cancer information centre.

**Skin care**
- Wash the treated area with warm water and a mild soap or aqueous cream and then pat dry with a soft towel.

  - It is advisable to moisturise the skin with an emollient such as an aqueous cream or E45 to help moisturise and soothe the skin. If you prefer to use a different cream, please speak to a member of the treating team for
further advice. They may advise you to stop using the cream or lotion if your skin becomes blistered or broken.

- Wear something loose and comfortable. Cotton is best next to the treated skin – better than man-made material.

- Men who are having part of their head, face or neck treated should use an electric shaver. Please remember to bring one with you if you are an inpatient.

- Keep the area of skin that has been treated away from direct heat, such as sunlamps, hair-dryers and direct sunlight. You should take extra care of your skin during treatment and as long as the reaction lasts. The skin in the treated area may always be more sensitive, so you will need to take care in the sun, even after your treatment has finished. You can use high protection sun cream on the treated area when the side effects have settled.

- There is more skin care advice in the leaflet ‘Skin care during and after your radiotherapy’. Please ask the radiographers for a copy.

**Nutritional advice**

- It is very important to keep your weight stable before and during the treatment. Try to eat small frequent meals or snacks throughout the day. Ask the radiotherapy or nursing staff for a copy of ‘Eating: Help yourself’ which has detailed information about coping with problems such as difficulty in swallowing, nausea and lack of appetite.

- Make sure you drink plenty of fluids.

- Try to avoid very hot food and drinks – let hot drinks cool slightly before drinking and avoid spicy foods. Cool drinks and ice-cream can be soothing.
Some people may need to change to a softer diet during treatment and for a period afterwards.

You may need nutritional supplement drinks if you are losing weight or you are not eating very well. Please speak to the radiographers, nurses or Christie doctor if you feel you are losing weight. Ask for a copy of the ‘Nutritional Drinks’ booklet for ideas. Nutritional supplement drinks are available on prescription from your doctor.

**After treatment ends**

After your treatment has ended, continue to follow the skin care and any other advice you have been given during your treatment until you feel your side effects from the radiotherapy have settled. This is usually 4 to 6 weeks after your treatment has finished.

You will see your consultant clinical oncologist for a review about 6 weeks after radiotherapy. We need to check that any side effects that you may have developed during or just after the radiotherapy have settled.

After you have finished your treatment, we will tell you about the arrangements for your first follow-up visit at an outpatient clinic. Some people return to The Christie for their follow-up visits. Other people return to a hospital nearer to their home. It may be possible to choose the arrangement that suits you and your family.

If you have any problems before you are due for your follow-up appointment you can ask your GP for advice or contact the nurse specialist who you had contact with. Alternatively you can contact the secretary of the radiotherapy consultant who treated you at The Christie.
Appointments

Once you are having treatment, if you have any problems with your appointment time, please contact the radiotherapy department on 0161 446 3485.

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
- Coping with fatigue
The cancer information centres have the full range of booklets free to patients and their relatives or carers. There are information centres at The Christie at 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 404019

**Christie information**
The Christie produces a range of patient information booklets and DVDs. Some of these are listed below:

- **DVDs on radiotherapy**
  You can borrow a DVD to watch at home. Ask staff on the ward, in outpatients or radiotherapy if you would like one of these. Available with English sub-titles or in Polish, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi.

- **Eating: Help Yourself**
  This booklet gives advice on coping with eating problems when you don’t feel well and when you are receiving treatment.

- **Nutritional drinks**
  Describes all the special nutritional products available to help people when eating is difficult.

- **Advice about soft and liquidised foods**
  For people who can only manage a soft or liquidised diet because of swallowing difficulties. Offers practical suggestions, recipes and nutritional information.
Where to get help: services for people with cancer
Discusses sources of help when you have cancer, where to go for financial help, and lists cancer support groups.

Be Active, Stay Active: a guide for exercising during and after treatment for cancer.
A booklet and DVD with a simple exercise programme you can follow. There is also more information about coping with fatigue and the benefits of exercise. Available with sub-titles, and in Urdu and Cantonese.

The booklets 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.

For the visually impaired: large print versions of the booklets are available. Please contact patient information on 0161 446 3576 or you can download these from The Christie website at www.christie.nhs.uk
Benefits and financial information

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. You may be entitled to Personal Independence Payments but new claims cannot be made for Disability Living Allowance.

People over 65 may be able to claim Attendance Allowance.

Find out more:
- Disability Living Allowance, call the Disability Benefits Helpline on 08457 123 456
- Attendance Allowance, call 0845 605 6055
- Personal Independence Payment (PIP), call the PIP Claim line on 0800 917 2222
- Carer’s benefits, call the Carer’s Allowance Unit on 0845 608 4321
- Contact The Christie at Withington general and benefits advisers on 0161 446 8538 or 8539. The Christie at Oldham has a benefits advice session on Thursday afternoons phone 0161 918 7745
- Contact your local social services department for help with equipment and adaptations, or for an assessment of care needs
- Macmillan Cancer Support has an advice line on 0808 808 00 00
- Useful websites: www.macmillan.org.uk or www.gov.uk
You may be able to claim travel costs for petrol and parking or public transport but not taxi fares if you receive: income-related Employment Support Allowance, Income Support, Universal Credit, Guaranteed Pension Credit or hold a valid tax credit exemption card. You may also be able to qualify for help if you are on a low income and have a valid HC2 or HC3 certificate. For advice please contact the general and benefits advisers.

Student training

The Christie is a training centre for postgraduate and undergraduate trainees so you may meet male and female 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 Hotline
The service is available 24 hours a day and 7 days a week.

The Christie Hotline can provide help and support at every stage of treatment. All patients having radiotherapy can contact the Hotline for support and advice for radiotherapy reactions.

Contacting The Christie Hotline. When you call the Hotline you will hear a ‘welcome’ message. Listen carefully and follow the instructions. The team aim to answer your call within 4 minutes. All calls are recorded for training and monitoring purposes. When you speak to the Hotline team, remember to report any new or worsening conditions.

The Christie Hotline
0161 446 3658
Private cancer care at The Christie Clinic

Patients with private medical insurance can access a full range of cancer treatment at The Christie Clinic. The partnership with The Christie NHS Foundation Trust and HCA International allows The Christie to invest in enhancing NHS services.

We work with a number of consultants who will be personally dedicated to your care.

If you wish to use your private medical insurance or pay for your treatment yourself there are three simple steps:

1. **Check your insurance cover.** There are a variety of insurance policies all offering different levels of support.

2. **Make an appointment.** There are no waiting lists. An appointment can be easily scheduled to suit you.

3. **For more information or advice:**
   - Speak to your consultant about continuing your treatment as a private patient.
   - Call us on 0161 918 7296 if you have any queries about our services, insurance issues or self-pay quotations.
   - Email us: info.christieclinic@hcahealthcare.co.uk
Contacts (via your consultant’s secretary)
Dr H Sheikh ........................................ 0161 446 3223
Dr L Bhatt ........................................... 0161 446 8580

Nurse specialist
Vikki Owen-Holt ................................. 0161 918 7368

For queries about radiotherapy appointments
Radiotherapy department ..................... 0161 446 3485

How to find the radiotherapy department

We try to ensure that all our information given to patients is accurate, balanced and based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact Patient.Information@christie.nhs.uk
Many of The Christie booklets and a list of UK help groups are available on The Christie website, the address is above. You can also access other patient information sites in the UK such as Macmillan Cancer Support and Cancerhelp UK via The Christie website.
Visit the Cancer Information Centre:
The Christie at Withington Tel: 0161 446 8100
The Christie at Oldham Tel: 0161 918 7745
The Christie at Salford Tel: 0161 918 7804
Open Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm.
Opening times can vary, please ring to check before making a special journey.