

Radiotherapy department

Radiotherapy for symptom control

Introduction

You have been recommended a short course of radiotherapy by your consultant. The radiotherapy treatment is designed to control specific symptoms and problems, reducing the need for medications and enabling you to do the activities you need and want to do. This is called palliative radiotherapy.

This leaflet will highlight the key points of the discussions you may have had with your consultant and treatment team, it should be used as a guide because the timing and effects of treatment vary from one person to another.

How does it work?

Radiotherapy uses exact, carefully measured doses of radiation. This radiation is delivered by high energy X-rays to a precise area of the body by a machine called a linear accelerator. Radiotherapy causes changes in cells (normal and cancer cells). Cancer cells are more sensitive to radiotherapy than normal cells and so more of them are killed. The normal cells are better able to repair themselves and so the damage to normal cells is mainly temporary. This is the reason why radiotherapy has some side effects. This treatment may be offered at the radiotherapy departments at The Christie in Withington, The Christie at Oldham or The Christie at Salford. The radiographers treating you are highly trained professionals and will be able to answer any questions or concerns you may have.

How often is it given?

Radiotherapy is usually given as outpatient appointments (sometimes known as fractions). It can be given daily over a week, or a number of weeks or in a single treatment. **It is very important to complete your treatment and attend for each appointment; please let the department know if you feel unable to attend.**

General advice for during treatment

It is advisable that you take any pain medication that you are prescribed prior to your radiotherapy appointments as you may find lying on the bed uncomfortable. **Please bring any medication that you may need during the day with you.**

Consent

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 Your consent may be withdrawn at any time before or during this treatment. Should you decide to withdraw your consent then a member of your treating team will discuss the possible consequences with you.



What are the benefits of this treatment?

Some people find their symptoms are better controlled, and most people notice some improvement. This usually happens 2 weeks after treatment, but may take up to 4 to 6 weeks for the full benefit.

Radiotherapy is not an immediate answer to pain. If you are finding things difficult, see your GP for help.

Before treatment

We will send you an appointment letter with a date to attend one of The Christie radiotherapy departments as soon as possible, but this may take up to 4 weeks.

We plan your treatment carefully to make sure the X-rays are targeted accurately. The radiographer will ask you to lie on a bed under a CT scanner. The position that you are in for this scan is the same position you will be in for the treatment. Please let a member of the team know if you are struggling to maintain this position as it is more difficult to change once the scan has been completed. The radiographers will then draw marks on your skin using a pen. These marks do wash off and so some permanent marks, similar to small freckles, will need to be made. These marks will never be made on the face. These will not be very noticeable, but it is an important way of locating treated areas in the future.

During your CT scan the couch moves in and out of the machine for a few minutes. Nothing will touch or hurt you, and you will not feel anything. This appointment normally takes from 15 to 45 minutes; you can still eat and drink as normal unless stated otherwise.

For some patients, it is necessary to make a plastic mould, also called a mask, to fit the treated area such as the head, neck or limb. The mould helps us to ensure that the treatment is delivered accurately each day. The treatment marks are placed on the mould in this instance, instead of the skin.

For other patients we may not need to take X-rays or a scan as we will simply draw around the area to be treated, for example if we are giving treatment to ribs or skin.

Treatment

The radiographers will have the details of your treatment and will explain to you exactly what will happen. They will have a brief chat with you and discuss the treatment and how to minimise 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.

The radiographers will take you into the treatment room and ask you to remove or loosen any clothing that covers the area being treated. There are cubicles for changing and also loose gowns to wear, if necessary. They will assist you on to the treatment bed. You will lie on a couch in the same position as you were for the planning. If a mask was required for your planning CT scan you will wear it for the treatment too. The radiographers will then adjust both 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 area takes a few minutes to treat, if you have more than one day of radiotherapy prescribed by your doctor you will have the same area treated each day and each session may take between 10 and 30 minutes, dependent on the area being treated. You will not feel any discomfort, it is like having an ordinary X-ray.

It is important that you keep still throughout your treatment and breathe normally.

The radiographers operate the machines from outside the room so you will be alone in the room during treatment but don't worry as the radiographers are close by and will watch you closely on monitors. When all the adjustments have been made and you are in exactly the right position, the radiographers will make sure you are okay and then leave the room and switch the machine on. There is nothing to feel and nothing to see. The machines make a buzzing noise when they are giving treatment.

During your treatment the radiographers may need to take images of the area you are having treated. This will be done at the same time as your treatment. **These images are purely to check that you are in the correct position and not to check how you are responding to treatment.**

Please do not feel abandoned; cameras inside the room give the radiographers a clear view of you at the control desk. 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, usually by raising a hand. They will switch off the machine and come in immediately.

Once your treatment has finished they will help you off the bed and arrange your next visit if you are coming for more than one treatment. You are then able to return home or to your ward.

Side effects

Side effects from radiotherapy vary. **Any side effects you get will depend on which part of your body is treated, and on the number of treatments you have.** Even people who have had very similar treatments can have different side effects. If any symptoms are thought to be likely, the doctor will have discussed these with you before treatment starts.

Ask your radiographer, doctor or nurse to tick which of the side effects below may be related to you, you may notice one or more of the following:

Skin reaction

The extent of a skin reaction in the treatment area will vary for each person depending on the area being treated and the type of treatment you have. Skin in the treatment area may become red, dry, itchy and/or sore and may begin to peel. **Some people have no skin problems at all.** For further information please ask a member of staff for a copy of the 'Skincare during and after your radiotherapy treatment' leaflet.

Tiredness

Radiotherapy may make you feel tired; this is one of the most common side effects. This is not entirely relieved by resting and can make physical activity difficult. Lethargy may continue for a few weeks after radiotherapy. Some of the things that can contribute to tiredness are:

- travelling to the hospital for treatment
- change to your daily routine
- change to your eating habits
- dehydration
- reduced physical activity
- interrupted sleep
- emotions - such as feeling low in mood and isolated

It is beneficial for your health to take gentle exercise as well as ensuring you rest. Listen to your body and if necessary allow yourself extra time to rest or sleep and speak to your treating team if you are concerned.

Flu-like symptoms

Some people may experience flu-like symptoms in the first 24 hours after treatment but with no temperature. A simple painkiller such as Paracetamol, and rest may help to relieve this.

[] Pain

If radiotherapy is given for pain relief you may experience some 'pain flare' in the area of treatment. This is a swelling around the treatment area in the days following treatment. It can cause a temporary increase in pain and tenderness. This is quite normal and can last a few days.

Avoid using a hot water bottle, heat pad, electric blanket or cold pack in the treatment area to ease the pain as this can cause the skin reaction to become worse.

Radiotherapy may take up to 6 weeks to help relieve your pain therefore your painkillers may need to be adjusted during this time. This is different for each individual. Continue with your pain medication until it starts to ease.

[] Hair loss

This happens only in the area being treated, for example, chest hair if your chest is being treated. The hair may grow back but it may be patchy. Ask a member of your treating team show you exactly where your hair may fall out.

[] Sore throat and swallowing discomfort

Treatment to the upper chest may cause a sore throat and / or difficulty swallowing; you may feel as if you have a lump in your throat when you swallow. Medicines can be prescribed to help alleviate this symptom. You might find it easier to swallow soft foods during this time.

[] Breathing and coughing

Radiotherapy can make you feel more breathless because of inflammation in the lungs. You may have an increase in your cough and sputum which may contain a small amount of blood, a small amount of blood in the phlegm can sometimes be expected. Don't worry, this is normal. Coughs can sometimes worsen when your treatment has finished. This is also normal. If you are already experiencing these symptoms they may temporarily increase.

[] Nausea (feeling sick)

You may feel sick if you have radiotherapy to an area which is near the stomach or abdomen. If we think this is likely then we will give you anti-sickness tablets to take before treatment. It is important to continue to eat and drink, try eating small meals more frequently. If nausea persists or you are vomiting (being sick) despite taking anti-sickness medication, tell your treatment team.

[] Bladder upset

If you are having treatment to your lower back or pelvis your bladder may become irritable during the course of treatment so that you may pass urine more frequently, perhaps with burning. You may feel an urgent need to pass urine. Drink plenty of clear fluids each day. Try to drink more than normal by having extra glasses of water and fruit juices until these symptoms settle. Some people find a glass of cranberry juice helpful (if you are taking anti-coagulants such as warfarin, you should not drink cranberry juice). Avoid large quantities of tea, coffee and alcohol as these make the symptoms worse.

[] Bowel upset

If you are having treatment to your lower back or pelvis you may experience loose bowels or diarrhoea. The team treating you can prescribe medicines to help with this. Consider reducing the amount of fibre in your diet until the diarrhoea goes away; please discuss this with the treating radiographers if you need any further advice.

[] Other side effects

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Side effects may get worse for a short while after treatment before settling down. Do not worry this is quite normal. During this time, follow the advice you have been given during treatment.

After your radiotherapy

When you return home, rest and take things easy for the next couple of days. Any further follow up with your consultant or family doctor will be explained to you before you finish your treatment.

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

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.

Useful contacts

If you have any queries during your radiotherapy or about your symptoms during treatment, please do not hesitate to ask a member of your treatment team or contact the radiotherapy reception:

Radiotherapy reception at Withington: **0161 446 3485**

Radiotherapy reception at Oldham: **0161 918 7700**

Radiotherapy reception at Salford: **0161 918 7800**

Out of hours (evenings and weekends), please contact The Christie Hotline on: **0161 446 3658**.

Following treatment you can contact your site specific nurse practitioner, Macmillan nurse or GP for further advice and support.

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.

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**

For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford. Opening times can vary, please check before making a special journey.



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