



# Radiotherapy to the oesophagus

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](http://www.christie.nhs.uk)** or visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford.

## 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.

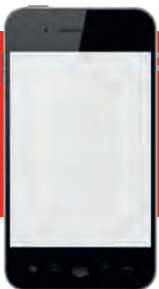
## What is radiotherapy?

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.

External beam radiotherapy can be delivered in many different ways using high energy radiation beams. These can be photons, electrons or protons. Photons and electrons are delivered from a machine called a linear accelerator whilst protons are delivered from a machine called a cyclotron.

Radiotherapy – department 39

Tel: **0161 446 3485**



### **Please note:**

**Mobile phones can interfere with the treatment equipment. Please look out for signs letting you know if it is safe to use your mobile phone. If you do have one with you, you may need to turn it off.**

The Christie NHS Foundation Trust now provides a proton beam therapy service. However, it is not appropriate to treat all kinds of cancers with proton beam therapy. This will be decided by your oncologist and discussed with you.

If it is appropriate to treat you with protons, there may be occasions when part of your treatment is given with photons. This will be discussed during the consent process.

The radiographers are specially trained professionals. 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 treatment sessions.

If your doctors are giving you chemotherapy alongside your radiotherapy, the treatment may be delivered over a maximum of 30 sessions, although 25 is the most common. If your doctor is treating you without the use of chemotherapy, the most common regime is 20 daily sessions of treatment.

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 have any scans or treatment.**

## 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

To help with the planning of your treatment, you will have a CT scan. The scans which are undertaken to plan your radiotherapy are solely aimed to give enough information to plan the radiotherapy accurately. These scans are not diagnostic and therefore do not give sufficient

information to assess the status of your cancer or any other abnormalities.

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.

You may have been identified as suitable for a more detailed CT scan. You will be asked to breathe normally and regularly whilst this is being done. You may be warned to try to avoid coughing or any unexpected movements as far as possible. Sometimes the radiographer will ask you to come to the department having abstained from food or drink for 2 hours, and then they may give you some water to drink before the scan. If you have a feeding tube in place you may be asked to avoid feeds for 2 hours before and be given the water through this tube just before the scan. If so then these same arrangements may be asked of you prior to each day of subsequent radiotherapy treatment.

## What happens during treatment?

On the day of your first treatment, you will come to the radiotherapy department. If you are an inpatient, a 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 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. Cameras inside the room gives the radiographers a clear view of you from the control desk 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 are taken 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. Call the radiotherapy department on **0161 446 3485**.

## 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?*

Not unless your head is being treated. 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 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 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, please give the radiographers as much notice as possible, although the department cannot guarantee to meet all requests.

The time we give you may vary slightly each day due to emergencies and so on. Please check your appointment time for the following day before you leave, in case of any changes.

Once a week, you will meet your consultant or one of their team. You do not need an appointment for this. 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 speak to the ward to organise when you will be brought for treatment and will ensure your treatment does not interfere with other tests or assessments on the ward. Please let the ward nurses know if you have any questions. If you are going home for the weekend, 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?*

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 to 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.

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.

## Prescriptions

Since April 2009, NHS patients being treated for cancer are entitled to free prescriptions. You will need an exemption certificate. Exemption certificates are available from The Christie Pharmacy and from your GP.

## Appointments

Once you are having treatment, if you have any problems with your appointment time, please contact the radiotherapy department where you are having treatment: The Christie at Withington on **0161 446 3485**, The Christie at Salford on **0161 918 7800** or The Christie at Oldham on **0161 918 7700**. 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 GP.

## Side effects of treatment

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 half way 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 to have foods that are easier to chew or a liquidised diet temporarily. Ask the staff for a copy of 'Eating a regular, easy to chew diet' which has helpful tips about foods that are easier to eat. 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. You may have to stay in for a few days until you are able to care for and manage your feeding tube and able to take in enough nutrition. 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 on **0161 446 3658** if you are concerned.

### Nausea or vomiting

Radiotherapy can cause you to feel nauseous (feeling sick), 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 flexible 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 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 skin gently with warm water using your normal shower or bath products. If preferred, you can wash with an aqueous cream but this has not been shown to reduce the chance of skin reactions occurring. If your skin becomes irritated after using a product, it is advisable to stop using that product for the time being. Pat the skin dry with a soft towel.



- You can continue to moisturise your skin while you are having radiotherapy treatment applying the moisturiser that you normally use. You do not need to change from this unless you find that your normal moisturiser starts to irritate your skin. Your treatment team may advise you to start moisturising the skin that is included within the treatment area. If they do, we recommend that you avoid products containing 'sodium lauryl sulfate' as this can irritate the skin. Your team can let you know about products that do not have this ingredient. If you have any questions or concerns, please ask a member of your radiography team for further advice.
- If your skin becomes blistered or broken during treatment, please stop using moisturising cream or lotion in that area.
- If your skin blisters or becomes broken during or in the days after completing radiotherapy treatment, you may need to have a dressing placed over this area to help with the healing process.
- 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. If you are having difficulty eating, try eating small, frequent meals or snacks. 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 eat foods that are easier to chew during treatment and for a period afterwards. See The Christie booklet 'Eating a regular, easy to chew diet'.
- 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 products' booklet for ideas. Nutritional supplement drinks are available on prescription from your doctor.

## Aftercare

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.

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.

## 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 – 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](http://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 Macmillan booklets. 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 4040**. You can also view all patient information on The Christie website in many languages by using the BrowseAloud function.

### **Christie information**

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

- **Radiotherapy to the head and neck and Radiotherapy**  
Available as booklets and films that you can watch on The Christie website. English subtitles and auto-translate function available.
- **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 products**

Describes all the special nutritional products available to help people when eating is difficult.

### ■ **Eating a regular, easy to chew diet**

For patients experiencing pain on swallowing or difficulty eating a normal, textured diet. 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 with a simple exercise programme you can follow. There is also more information about coping with fatigue and the benefits of exercise. A short film can be viewed on the website and is available with English subtitles and has an auto-translate function.

The booklets are free to patients coming to The Christie. If you are an inpatient and would like a copy, please ask the ward staff. If you are an outpatient please ask your nurse, doctor or radiographer.

## 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 if you are aged 16–64.

People aged 65 or over who need help with personal care or supervision 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.

## Contacts

### **(Contacts via your consultant's secretary)**

Dr H Sheikh – **0161 446 3223**

Dr L Bhatt – **0161 446 8580**

Dr Radhakrishna – **0161 446 3820**

### **Nurse specialist**

Vikki Owen-Holt – **0161 918 7368**

Esther McQueenie – **0161 956 1073**

### **For queries about radiotherapy appointments**

Radiotherapy department – **0161 446 3485**

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 [patient.information@christie.nhs.uk](mailto:patient.information@christie.nhs.uk)

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  
Manchester M20 4BX

**0161 446 3000**

**[www.christie.nhs.uk](http://www.christie.nhs.uk)**



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