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Sussex Cancer Care

Having radiotherapy to the head and neck

Information for Patients

What is radiotherapy?

Your Oncologist has advised that you would benefit from a course of radiotherapy.
Radiotherapy is the use of high energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells and can help to remove, shrink or ease pain caused by a tumour. It can be used alone or with other treatments such as chemotherapy.

How often will I have radiotherapy?
You will have radiotherapy 5 days a week, usually Monday to Friday with a rest on Saturday and Sunday. We will make up for any bank holidays that occur during your treatment. It is very important that you attend all of your radiotherapy appointments. If you are feeling unwell or think that you may be unable to attend for any other reason, please contact the radiotherapy department as soon as possible on: 01273 664901 as it may be important to have an urgent medical review.

Who will look after me during my radiotherapy treatment?

During your course of treatment you will be seen every week by the head and neck team. This may include a consultant, specialist radiographer, nurse, dietitian or speech and language therapist. They will make sure that you are managing the treatment well and can provide you with help and advice or any medicines you may need. They can also help you to access other assistance such as counselling and emotional support or practical help and advice such as financial support.
There are also a team of volunteers from the head and neck cancer support group (THANCS) who have had or have cared for someone having the same type of treatment as you. They are recognisable by their dark green Macmillan t-shirts and are around on Monday (Chemo), Wednesday (Main Waiting Area) and Friday (Radiotherapy) mornings.

Who will be looking after me?

Dietitian
It is the dietitian's job to make sure that you are receiving all the nutrients that your body needs. This is particularly important during any treatment, when you need to be as strong as possible. This is so that your immune system is working as well as it can and any wounds heal well afterwards. If you are experiencing difficulty with eating or drinking or have lost weight, the dietitian may give you advice about:

- Suitable foods to eat
- Adding extra nourishment to your food
- Supplement drinks
- Balanced meals.

Contact number - 01273 696955 Ext: 67488

Speech and language therapy
This service is available if you are experiencing speech, voice (communication) or swallowing (eating/drinking) problems. You may find that you are having difficulties in these areas at the time of diagnosis, or may need help with changes in speech, voice or swallowing that result from treatment such as surgery or radiotherapy. The speech and language therapist may advise you on exercises to encourage movement of the muscles involved in speech and swallowing, or provide equipment to make communicating and eating and drinking easier. You may need help to learn a new way to control your swallowing, as well as advice about foods and drinks which are likely to be safely and easily managed.

Contact Number— 01273 696955 Ext 67211

Who will be looking after me?

Consultant Clinical Oncologist
It is the role of the clinical oncologist to provide medical care to you while on treatment. The oncologist will plan and prescribe your chemotherapy and radiotherapy. You will see one of our oncologists throughout your treatment.

Dr Simcock
Dr Simpson
Dr Wakeham

They can be contacted via secretary

01273 696955 Ext 63023

Head and neck cancer Specialist Radiographer/Nurse
It is the role of the head and neck cancer Specialist radiographer/Nurses to support you from diagnosis and throughout treatment. At diagnosis and at each stage of your care pathway, you will receive information about the treatment options available so that you can decide what is best for you. The head and neck cancer Specialist radiographer/Nurse can give practical advice and information about any aspect of your treatment. They will see you each week while having radiotherapy and after treatment is completed to assess your side effects .They will be your key worker and your main point of contact with the hospital.

They can be contacted on:

Cancer specialist nurse - 01273 696955 Ext 67435
Specialist radiographer - 01273 664901 Ext 67436

How do I prepare for radiotherapy?

Immobilisation mask
Before you can begin a course of radiotherapy you will have an immobilisation mask made in the mould room which you will wear during your treatment. This mask is made from a lightweight thermoplastic, which is closely fitted around the face, head and shoulders to ensure you remain still and in the correct position. You will be lying down for this process and will need to remove your top clothing, jewellery, glasses, hearing aids, dentures, wigs/hair pieces or removable prosthetics.
The mould room staff will give you information about what to expect and will explain what they are doing as they work.

CT plan Scan
The next step is to have a CT scan which will normally take place on the same day as you have your mask made. This process will take around 30-40mins. It may be necessary for you to have an injection of special dye known as contrast to make some softer areas show up better on the scan. The CT staff will let you know if you need this

Your Oncologist will use your CT scan to plan your treatment

If you are taking any medication, particularly for pain, please bring them with you to the hospital

What happen in my pre treatment appointment?

You will have an appointment with the specialist radiographer, clinical nurse specialist and/or speech and language therapist before you start your radiotherapy. This is a chance for you to get more information about what your treatment will involve It is also a good chance to ask any questions you may have or discuss any worries. This appointment may be in person at the hospital, over the telephone or in the form of a group session held at the Horizon centre on Tuesday

What will happen on the day of the treatment?

Please report to radiotherapy reception when you arrive each day for treatment. On the first day the treatment radiographers will have a brief discussion with you and answer any questions which you may have.

When you enter the treatment room you will be shown where to get changed if you do need to remove any items of clothing. You will then be asked to lie down on the treatment bed. Your mask will be put on and the radiographers will spend sometime ensuring that you are lying in exactly the same position as when you had your CT scan.

The radiographers will need to leave the room while your treatment is being given. They can see you on CCTV at all times though, and should you need them at any point all you need to do is raise your hand and they will come straight back into the room. You may be aware of the machine moving or the radiographers coming in and out of the room from time to time, please remain still until they remove your mask and tell you that your treatment is finished.

Radiotherapy treatment is completely painless, you will not see or feel anything while it is being delivered.

Smoking

We understand that this is a very stressful time for you, however smoking while having radiotherapy will make any side effects you have much worse. It will make the skin, mouth and throat dryer which will lead to them becoming more sore. Smoking also increases the risk of long term side effects so if you can, try to give up or at least cut down while you are having treatment. If you need help with this you can speak to the Head and Neck team or call in to see a smoking cessation adviser at our outpatient pharmacy Pharm@sea (beside main outpatients). Your GP can also advise you of any Stop Smoking services available locally.

Alcohol

Try to keep your alcohol intake to a minimum while you are having treatment. A small amount of beer or wine is unlikely to be harmful but spirits in particular can make the throat and mouth very sore and increase the risk of ulceration. For more information about what levels are safe or for help cutting down, speak to the head and neck team.

What is on – treatment review?

You will be seen weekly in a multi-disciplinary clinic. It is often beneficial to bring a friend or relative to this appointment. The team will thoroughly assess you each week, and look at all aspects of your care to ensure that you have all the support you need. They can also help you to access complimentary therapies and/or financial and social support to help you cope with the practical effects of diagnosis and treatment on your life. You may find it helpful to write down any questions or worries you have during the week and take this with you to discuss in clinic.

What happen after radiotherapy?

Symptoms you develop during treatment are likely to persist for a few weeks after completion. Don't be worried if your symptoms get worse before they get better, this is normal. Many of the symptoms should gradually begin to improve and within around eight weeks your skin should have healed and your mouth and throat will no longer be as painful. However, some symptoms such as dry mouth and taste changes may persist for much longer.

Can I get psychological support or counselling?

We know that having cancer treatment is a worrying time for both you and those close to you. We are here to support you every step of the way so don't be afraid to tell us if you feel you are struggling to cope or need a little extra help. We can provide a listening ear when you need it and can also refer you for specialist counselling if you feel that would help. The Macmillan Horizon Centre also offer a range of complimentary therapies, relaxation and support both one-to-one and in groups. You don't need an appointment to go in and we encourage all patients to do so at some point so that you are aware of the extra support available

What are the side effects of radiotherapy?

Although you cannot see or feel radiotherapy it has many side effects, most of which are temporary but some are long term and permanent. Most patients will suffer some but not all of these as they vary from patient to patient depending of the area being treated. Your oncologist will discuss this with you

Tiredness

You are likely to feel more tired during your radiotherapy. This is a common side effect of the radiotherapy treatment, however travelling to and from the department can contribute to this. To help with fatigue, it is important to listen to your body. It may help if you can plan your day so you have time to rest and do things that are important to you when you feel least tired. However, you will need to plan your day around your treatment.

You may need support to help with your everyday activities such as shopping, laundry and meal preparation. Family, friends and neighbours are often glad of the chance to lend a helping hand.

Soreness of the mouth

At first you may notice that your mouth becomes drier. As the treatment progresses, areas of the mouth may ulcerate and become swollen and sore.

It is important during the treatment to keep your mouth healthy. Your healthcare team will provide you with advice regarding the appropriate mouth care.

Soreness of the throat

As the treatment progresses, your throat may become sore inside making it difficult to swallow. You will see our speech and language therapist if swallowing becomes an issue. Medications can be prescribed to help make swallowing easier.

Eating problems
Good nutrition is essential during the course of the radiotherapy treatment and for recovery from treatment. Some of the side effects of treatment can make eating and drinking difficult and challenging, but it is important to try to eat as well as you can. With your permission, you will be weighed frequently during your treatment and our aim is to maintain your nutritional status and minimise weight loss. You will be reviewed regularly by a dietitian throughout treatment to help with any problems with eating and drinking or weight loss. Sometimes despite all your efforts, eating and drinking can become so difficult that nutrition and fluids are provided through a feeding tube. In some cases, a feeding tube prior to treatment might be recommended.

Dryness of the mouth
Your salivary glands may be affected by the radiotherapy treatment. Saliva lubricates the mouth, protects the teeth and starts the process of digestion. This dryness may last for quite a few months and may be permanent in some cases. You may also find that your saliva becomes thick and stringing as the treatment progresses. Your health care team will give you advice to help with this.

Taste changes
Along with changes to your saliva you may notice a change in your taste sensation. Food and drink may either taste different to what you are expecting or in some cases, there may be complete lack of taste.

Vocal changes
If your larynx is included in the treatment area you may find that your voice becomes hoarse and croaky over the course of your treatment. Although this will continue in the weeks after treatment it should improve over time.
Your speech and language therapist will provide you with information and advice to help to take care of your voice.

Nausea/Vomiting
If your treatment includes chemotherapy drugs you may experience sickness. However before you have chemotherapy you will be given steroids and anti sickness medicines, which will help with this. There are many different medications so if you feel sick please let the team know.

Constipation
Please let us know if you are constipated. This is common during treatment because of the changes in diet and the medication. We can help you resolve this problem

Skin soreness
The skin in the treated area will gradually become dry and slightly reddened, very much like sunburn. It can even peel or weep. Your healthcare team will advise you on how to take care of your skin. If you have a beard or moustache you may be required to remove it before your mask is made. During your treatment, it is advised to avoid wet shaving and use an electric razor.

Hair loss
Hair roots directly within the treatment area will be damaged by radiotherapy causing the hair to fall out. Hair loss is usually temporary and it will grow back; however it may not be as thick as before and in some people can be patchy. The time it takes and the way it grows back depends on the dose of radiotherapy you have received.

Hearing problems
If your ear is included in the treated area your hearing may be affected by the radiotherapy treatment. This is due to swelling inside your ear and will return to normal a few weeks after treatment has finished. Inside the ear may feel dry, sore and/or itchy. This is a normal reaction, which will settle down after treatment is finished.