



The Clatterbridge
Cancer Centre
NHS Foundation Trust



Radiotherapy for skin cancer

Radiotherapy

A guide for patients and carers

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What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written for patients who are going to receive radiotherapy for skin cancer. It aims to help you understand more about your radiotherapy treatment.

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is the use of X-rays to destroy cancerous cells. In the skin, it is mainly used to treat basal cell cancers and squamous cell cancers although other conditions may also benefit from this treatment.

When is radiotherapy used?

- When the cancer is too large or in a difficult site for surgery
- When the patient does not want surgery or is not fit enough for surgery
- When radiotherapy may give a better cosmetic result than surgery (for instance, some cancers on the nose)
- When there has been an operation to remove the cancer and it is considered that radiotherapy might reduce the risk of the cancer returning

Where will you receive the treatment?

Radiotherapy for skin cancer is given as an outpatient procedure, mainly in the Orthovoltage Department at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral or at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre- Liverpool. Generally, you will not need to be admitted to hospital.

What is the duration of the treatment?

The number of treatments you have will depend on the type, position and size of your skin cancer. It can sometimes be given as a single treatment, but usually you have treatment once a day over a period of one to two weeks or more. This will be confirmed by your oncologist (doctor specialising in the treatment of cancer).

Treatment is not usually given on Saturdays, Sundays and only occasionally on Bank Holidays. The therapeutic radiographers will tell you about the arrangements for any missed treatments over Bank Holidays.

Planning your treatment

When you come for radiotherapy, the area of the skin to be treated will be marked using a marker pen by an oncologist. These ink marks will be used to line-up the machine each time you are treated. Usually, a photograph is taken with the ink marks around the cancer, but you may be asked to keep these marks until the treatment has been completed. If the area to be treated is on your head and is large or complex, it may be necessary to make a plastic mask that rests on your face to help you and the staff to get you in the same position for each treatment. The staff who are looking after you will explain about this in more detail, if it is needed. A special lead cut-out may be used to treat an irregular shaped area of skin.





Example of skin marks



Treatment applicator on skin

Having your treatment

The actual treatment only takes a few minutes. The therapeutic radiographer will position you on a couch and make sure that you are comfortable, because you have to lie very still during the treatment breathing normally throughout. If your skin cancer is near your eye or teeth, a small lead shield will be applied during treatment to protect these areas from the radiation. You will be left alone while you have your treatment, but the therapeutic radiographer will be able to hear and see you. You will not be able to see or feel the radiotherapy. Radiotherapy does not make you radioactive. It is perfectly safe to be with other people, including children, throughout your course of treatment.

Are there any side effects?

Radiotherapy for skin cancer only affects the area treated. You will not feel sick or tired from the treatment, or lose your hair, unless your skin cancer is in an area covered by hair. You should be able to continue your usual activities or work throughout your treatment, and any side effects you experience will be monitored regularly by a doctor or therapeutic radiographer.

The side effects normally occur in the latter part of the treatment and may continue for some weeks after completion. After the treatment, the affected skin will become red and sore, like sunburn. This reaction can take several weeks to settle. The area may become crusty and scab over, sometimes more than once. When the scab falls off, there will be good skin underneath. Scarring from radiotherapy is usually mild, but over years the skin of the treated area tends to become paler.

Radiotherapy skin reactions are variable in appearance and timing. Some patients having large areas of skin treated may need contact with district nurses for dressings for a short time.



These pictures give a general idea of what you might expect from your treatment.

Week 1



During the first week after treatment your skin will get red and sore. During this time you can apply creams as recommended by your Radiotherapy team.

Week 2-4



A scab has formed, the area may bleed or weep; use dry dressings only.

Week 4-6



The scab will be dry and eventually come away.

Month 2 onwards



Final result; use moisturisers and a high factor sun block (SPF50) regularly to treated areas of skin which are exposed to the sun.

How should you take care of your skin?

While on treatment, you should aim to keep the treatment area as dry as possible, however, when carrying out normal washing routine you can wash the area, gently, using warm, tepid water. If you are having treatment near the hair line, be careful when washing your hair and do not use a hair dryer near the area being treated, but allow it to dry naturally. It is better to keep the treated area out of strong winds and sunlight as these can irritate the skin and make the reaction worse. Try to avoid clothes rubbing the treated area.

Pregnancy

It is very important that individuals are not and do not become pregnant whilst having radiotherapy. Please inform a member of staff immediately if you think you may be pregnant.

What happens after you have completed your radiotherapy treatment?

Your oncologist will arrange for you to be seen in clinic around 6 weeks after you have finished your treatment.



Contact details

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Liverpool

65 Pembroke Place, Liverpool, L7 8YA

Tel: 0151 556 5000

www.clatterbridgecc.nhs.uk

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral

Clatterbridge Road, Bebington, Wirral, CH63 4JY

Tel: 0151 556 5000

www.clatterbridgecc.nhs.uk

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree

Lower Lane, Fazakerley, Liverpool, L9 7AL

Tel: 0151 556 5959

www.clatterbridgecc.nhs.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk

Tel: 0800 808 0000

Cancer Information and Support Centre:

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Liverpool

Tel: 0151 318 8805

If you have any general enquiries prior to starting your treatment, please contact the Skin Specialist Therapy Radiographer on **0151 556 5079 or 0151 318 8414**, Monday to Friday during office hours (9am - 5pm).

The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre Hotline 0800 169 5555

If you are unwell during, or up to six weeks following your cancer treatment, please call The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre Hotline. Your call will be answered by a dedicated nurse advisor. This line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

If your enquiry is of a routine (non-urgent nature), you can contact your consultants secretary through switchboard on **0151 556 5000**.

Maggies

Maggie's is a charity providing free cancer support and information to anybody who been affected by cancer. Our Cancer Nurse Specialists, Psychologists and benefits advisors are here to support you during treatment or after your treatment has finished. The Maggie's Centres allow you to share experiences with others in a similar situation around our kitchen table. We provide courses on survivorship, bereavement, stress management, mindfulness, tai chi, yoga, relaxation or cancer support groups. You do not need an appointment or a referral to access any support from Maggie's, you can just drop in. Our telephone number is **0151 334 4301**.



How we produce our information

All of our leaflets are produced by staff at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre and this information is not sponsored or influenced in any way. Every effort is made to ensure that the information included in this leaflet is accurate and complete and we hope that it will add to any professional advice you have had. All our leaflets are evidence based where appropriate and they are regularly reviewed and updated. If you are concerned about your health in any way, you should consult your healthcare team.

We rely on a number of sources to gather evidence for our information. All of our information is in line with accepted national or international guidelines where possible. Where no guidelines exist, we rely on other reliable sources such as systematic reviews, published clinical trials data or a consensus review of experts. We also use medical textbooks, journals and government publications.

References for this leaflet can be obtained by telephoning 0151 556 5570.

If you need this leaflet in large print, Braille, audio or different language, please call 0151 556 5570.

If you have a comment, concern, compliment or complaint, please call 0151 556 5203.

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