

Having radiotherapy to your skin

Your doctor has recommended that you have radiotherapy to your skin. This factsheet explains how your treatment will be prepared and delivered. The treatment is usually given in a short number of visits but often requires quite specialised preparation. Your doctor will discuss how many visits to the radiotherapy department you will require and we will discuss your appointments with you to fit in with your needs.

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is a type of radiation treatment using x-rays. Treatment for skin lesions is given using a machine called a superficial treatment machine or a linear accelerator. Treatment delivery is completely painless and only takes about 10 minutes to deliver. The x-rays used to treat you only penetrate the skin to a shallow depth. This means that there are few side effects other than to the skin in the area requiring treatment.

How does radiotherapy work?

Radiation damages the cells exposed to the treatment. The healthy, normal skin cells can repair themselves, while the abnormal cancer cells cannot recover.

What happens now?

We will ask you to sign a consent form that confirms that you wish to receive this treatment. You can change your mind at any time; however we strongly recommend that you complete a course of treatment once you have started, as you would risk the radiotherapy failing unless the full course is completed.

Treatment

Your treatment must be planned before we can deliver it. Sometimes this will be very simple and the doctor will use a marker pen to highlight the area for treatment just before treatment is delivered. The marks on your skin are temporary but can be quite stubborn to remove. If you want the marks removed, please ask.

On other occasions, the doctor may decide that we need to make an individualised mask to ensure your treatment is safely delivered. This is often the case if the site requiring treatment is close to your eyes, nose, mouth or ear. Please see The Royal Marsden factsheet *Having a lead cut-out mask made*. The lead mask will usually be ready to use within two to three weeks.

Sometimes, whether you have a mask or not, it is necessary to add some additional internal shielding, such as into the nasal cavity, mouth, ear or under the eyelid. This is to protect these areas from becoming excessively sore. This process should not be painful but can be a little



uncomfortable. This is only necessary if the area of treatment is directly above or next to these areas and will be discussed with you.

After planning the treatment, we will take photos of the area, make a traced template and take measurements. Occasionally you may be asked to have a CT scan to aid planning the treatment.

Radiotherapy treatment

Most patients will attend for treatment Monday to Friday - the doctor will have discussed your individual schedule.

At each visit, the radiographers will position you on the treatment couch as you were for the mark up. They will use the tracings and photographs taken at that time to confirm the position of the treatment and the placement of any shielding. The shielding can be quite heavy and cold initially, but it should not be uncomfortable. The radiotherapy machine will come very close to deliver the treatment, but it will not move once in position. When the team are happy with the position, they will leave the room to deliver the treatment.

The radiographers can see and hear you at all times when you are in the treatment room. If you have any problems, they will advise you to call out or raise your hand for attention and they can interrupt the treatment to help you. You may hear a buzzing noise as the treatment is delivered but you will not be able to feel anything happening.

Please see our policy on monitoring in radiotherapy in The Royal Marsden booklet *Radiotherapy; your questions answered.*

Side effects

The reaction to the radiotherapy varies and depends on the number of treatments, the size and location of the area treated, and your own skin sensitivity to radiation.

The most common side effects are:

Skin reaction - This usually starts after the treatment has completed but can occur during radiotherapy if you are having several weeks of therapy. The reaction can get worse for two to three weeks after radiotherapy finishes and should then settle quite quickly, completely stopping by four to six weeks from the end of treatment.

- Your skin will become increasingly red and angry, sore and inflamed
- The area can become itchy
- The treated area may blister, then weep and sometimes bleed, before forming a crust or a scab
- As the treated area continues to heal, the scab will fall off and there may be a little bleeding
- If your nose or ear is being treated, you may experience crusting and bleeding inside the nostrils or ear canal
- The scab will fall off when the healing process is completed. Do not worry if you knock it, but scratching or actively removing it may delay healing.



Hair loss - Hair present within the treatment area will come out after treatment. Your doctor will have told you if this is likely to be permanent.

How to care for the treated skin during and after treatment

- Use tepid water - showering is ideal
- Avoid using soap or shampoo on the treated area
- Dab the area dry with a soft towel and avoid rubbing
- Avoid shaving the treatment area
- Do not rub any ink marks on your skin - if it is important to remove them, please ask the radiographers to do so
- Do not expose the treatment area to the sun or other weather extremes, however where possible, try to keep the area open to the air. If you feel more comfortable covering it, use a non-stick sterile dressing. If you need dressings during the radiotherapy course, these will be dispensed in the radiotherapy department.
- You can use your normal skin products on the rest of your body.

Skin dryness is common. You may be given a cream that you can use to moisturise the skin in the treatment area. **Do not** use Vaseline or medicated creams in the treatment area.

Once your skin no longer feels tender, you can return to your normal skin care routine.

Because the radiotherapy is only affecting your skin in the particular treatment area, you should feel well throughout your treatment and you will be able to continue all your usual activities. Some patients however, may feel tired after radiotherapy.

Late side effects – three months onwards

Over months or years, the skin in the treated area may lighten or less commonly, darken, over time. These changes in the skin colour can be progressive, that is, get worse over time. Sometimes, telangiectasia may develop in the area (this appears like broken thread veins). Always use high factor sun cream, ideally SPF 50, on the treated area when in the sun.

Follow up after your treatment

You will be seen in clinic four to six weeks after completion of treatment.

Contact details

Please make sure you ask any questions you need to and that you feel comfortable with what you have been told. If you want any explanation repeated the radiotherapy team is happy to do this – there is a great deal to take in during one session.

If you have any questions or concerns about this treatment you can contact:



The Royal Marsden switchboard: 020 8642 6011

Please ask to speak to your consultant's secretary (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm)

Your consultant is _____

Alternatively, please call:

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899 (available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

If you need to change your radiotherapy appointments, please phone the radiotherapy bookings team on 020 8915 6018 (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm)

