

Palliative lung radiotherapy

This factsheet provides information about the course of treatment that you have been advised to receive. It also includes details about other things that you may need to be aware of, although it is not intended to be comprehensive. If you have any questions after reading this, please do not hesitate to ask your doctor, research nurse or radiographer.

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy involves the use of high energy x-rays to shrink the tumour and ease symptoms such as pain or breathlessness. It is given from the outside by an x-ray machine called a linear accelerator and is directed at the area of the tumour.

What happens before radiotherapy?

You will be given an outpatient appointment to see the doctor who will explain why you need treatment, its effectiveness and possible side effects. It may help to keep a list of questions that you may wish to ask when attending treatment or clinic. If you agree to have the treatment, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

You will then be given an appointment to attend for a CT planning scan (described below) as part of the preparation for radiotherapy along with a start date for the treatment. You will also be given a booklet on radiotherapy and a list of contact telephone numbers for any queries or problems you may have.

What treatment preparation is needed?

The first appointment before you start treatment will be for the pre-treatment planning CT scan. You will be positioned on the CT bed in a position similar to the one you will be in for treatment and then a CT scan will be taken. After the scan, the radiographers may tattoo your skin (a small dot only) to ensure the treatment is given accurately. They may also ask if they can make a mark on your chest with a washable felt tip pen, again to help direct the treatment. The visit to the planning CT scanner lasts approximately 30 minutes. This scan then helps the doctor decide where and how to give the radiotherapy.

What happens during treatment?

Palliative radiotherapy to the chest is usually given in one, five or 10 – 12 daily treatments (excluding weekends and bank holidays). Each visit to the department will probably take somewhere between 30 – 60 minutes. The majority of the time in the treatment room will be spent making sure you are in the correct position. In the radiotherapy room you will be asked to lie on a couch in the same position as you did for the planning CT scan. The radiotherapy machine or linear accelerator will be directed to deliver the treatment (high-energy radiation beams) to the area planned for treatment by the doctors.



The treatment itself only takes a few minutes. Once you are correctly positioned, the radiographers will leave the room. Although you will be on your own during treatment, the radiographers are able to see you and hear you by means of a TV monitor and intercom system. The radiotherapy machine may move and make different noises during treatment - this is normal and is nothing to worry about. There are no immediate side effects from the treatment, and you should not feel anything out of the ordinary during or soon after each treatment.

What problems might I expect during and after radiotherapy?

Over the course of treatment, you may notice some skin changes and become tired. You may also experience discomfort on swallowing and occasionally shortness of breath and dry cough may occur towards the end of or after treatment. These side effects and how to cope with them are detailed below:

Tiredness: Radiotherapy may make you feel tired. This tends to occur towards the end of treatment and can last up to four to six weeks after radiotherapy. It is advisable to take frequent rests and try not to over exhaust yourself.

Skin changes: You may experience pink skin, as though you have been sitting out in the sun or if you have more pigmented skin, it may become darker. Occasionally, the skin may become dry and flaky. During this stage it is best to apply a non-medicated moisturiser.

Pain on swallowing: The food pipe (oesophagus) runs down the middle of the chest. It can potentially be inflamed by radiotherapy which causes discomfort when you swallow. If this happens, please tell us when you attend clinic. If you are at home, contact us for advice as we may be able to recommend some medication.

Shortness of breath and worsening cough: The lungs can also get inflamed with the radiotherapy and you may develop a persistent dry cough or worsening shortness of breath. This is called pneumonitis and can happen up to several weeks after treatment. You may need to take a short course of steroids. Please inform your doctor if you experience this.

After your radiotherapy has been completed, you will be seen in outpatients about four weeks later. This is to make sure any side effects have settled and to assess whether your symptoms are better after your treatment. If you have any problems or questions before the appointment is due, please call either the lung clinical nurse specialist or one of the doctors looking after you.

What other things should I be aware of?

Steroids

If you are taking dexamethasone or prednisolone tablets (commonly known as steroids), please take them with food or with a milky drink. It helps if you do not take them late in the day (no later than midday) as they may keep you awake at night. Do not stop taking steroids without medical advice. Please bring a list of your medications with you when attending clinic.

Support

Other members of the team such as the clinical nurse specialist, dietitian, occupational therapist, palliative care nurse or district nurse may also contact you to give help and advice. This is to ensure that all available support is there for you during and after radiotherapy. Such services will be discussed with you first and nobody will be involved in your care without your agreement.

Finance



As a person with a diagnosis of cancer you are entitled to free NHS prescriptions. Ask at the chemist or pharmacy for an exemption certificate form FP92A and get your doctor to sign this. You may be entitled to other benefits. Please discuss this with the lung clinical nurse specialist who can refer you to the Welfare Rights Advisor at The Royal Marsden.

Follow up

Please ensure that you have a follow up clinic appointment on completion of your radiotherapy. If you do not have an appointment to be seen again, then please ask for one. This can either be at The Royal Marsden or at the hospital where you were initially diagnosed.

Contact details

Clinical secretaries for Consultants

Dr F. McDonald:	020 8915 6083
Dr I. Locke:	020 8661 3169
Dr M. Ahmed:	020 8661 3374

Lung Cancer Specialist Nurses

Sutton and Chelsea:	020 3186 5605
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Weekends and evenings

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