

Radiotherapy treatment of the abdomen

Introduction

Treatment to the abdomen may be required to treat lymph nodes or tumours that have grown in the area. Your doctors have recommended that you have radiotherapy treatment (which may be combined with chemotherapy).

This factsheet is about your radiotherapy treatment, what the treatment involves and the possible side effects. We will give you a separate factsheet about any chemotherapy you might have.

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is a type of anti-cancer treatment using x-rays. The treatment is given using a machine called a linear accelerator and you cannot feel treatment delivery. It takes about 10 - 20 minutes to deliver the treatment.

How does radiotherapy work?

Radiation damages cells that grow and divide rapidly. Only the cells in the area of the body receiving treatment are affected and modern treatment methods mean that we can avoid treating normal cells as much as possible. The healthy, normal cells can repair and it is hoped that the abnormal, cancer cells cannot recover.

What happens now?

We will ask you to sign a consent form that confirms that you agree 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 the treatment area is likely to be near, or include some part of one kidney, it may be necessary to check how well your kidneys are working before your treatment is planned and started. This involves a blood test and a scan (DMSA scan), which is carried out in the Nuclear Medicine Department.

You may also need to have an MRI scan. This type of imaging will give a detailed picture of your upper abdomen, which can give us additional useful information.

Planning your radiotherapy treatment (pre-treatment)

Before starting the radiotherapy, we will need to carry out a CT scan while you lie in the treatment position, so we can design the radiotherapy according to your individual needs. Please see the factsheet *Having radiotherapy CT planning* for further information and to check what time you need to arrive before your scheduled appointment, so that we can explain the scan and make any other preparations needed. The treatment will be planned specifically for you, to make sure that



the area for treatment is accurately targeted with the least amount of normal tissues included. This planning can sometimes take up to four weeks to complete. Your treatment start date will be the earliest time that we can safely have the planning completed.

The CT planning session will usually take about 30 minutes.

After your planning session, a time and date to start the radiotherapy treatment will be confirmed.

Radiotherapy treatment

You will need to report to the receptionist in the Radiotherapy Department every day when you arrive. The receptionist will let the radiographers working on your machine know that you have arrived. On your first visit, the radiographers will set aside some time to talk you through the treatment and answer any extra questions you may have, so please arrive twenty minutes before your treatment time on that day.

You will receive your radiotherapy treatment every day, Monday to Friday. A course of treatment can take between two and six weeks. Treatment is not usually given on bank holidays, although sometimes special arrangements are made.

At each visit, the radiographers will position you on the treatment couch as you were for the planning scan. The radiographers will explain what they need to do or ask you to make small movements so that the marks that were put on your skin during the planning stage line up with laser lights in the treatment room. When they are happy with the position, the staff 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 will come in to help you. Some treatment machines have background music playing to help you feel more comfortable. The radiotherapy machine will move around you into different positions but it will not touch you. Although you can hear a buzzing noise when the treatment is being delivered, 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.*

Care during your course of treatment

The radiographers who you see each day can give you advice if you have any problems. They can also contact someone from the radiotherapy team to come and see you for specialist advice. Other members of the team include the clinical nurse specialists, dietitians and radiotherapy nurses. You will have regular blood tests and you will also be seen in a clinic regularly to make sure that you are managing your treatment.

Research has shown that radiotherapy is less effective if you smoke. Smoking will also increase the side effects of radiotherapy. Please ask if you want help to give up smoking during your treatment.

Side effects

Side effects can occur during the treatment or can appear several months and years after the treatment.



Early side effects

- **Fatigue** (tiredness) - is common and can often be made worse by having to travel to hospital each day. The tiredness will slowly improve after your treatment has finished.
- **Skin reaction** – You are unlikely to get any skin reaction.
- **Loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, indigestion, weight loss, a sensation of fullness in the abdomen or diarrhoea** – your stomach and small bowel may become inflamed during the course of radiotherapy. This can cause any of these symptoms, most of which can be controlled with medicines and all should settle within a few weeks of finishing treatment. We will prescribe some anti-sickness medication to take before each radiotherapy treatment.
- **Fertility** – this treatment is unlikely to make you infertile so you are strongly advised to use a reliable form of contraceptive. If you or your partner becomes pregnant during or shortly after radiotherapy, there may be a possibility of damage to the baby.

Late side effects

These depend on the organs close to the area being treated and can occur despite our efforts to minimise the radiation dose that the normal organs receive. Your doctor will discuss with you which side effects you may experience.

- **Pancreas** – you may not absorb fat (from digested food) from your bowel and this can cause loose bowel motions. This is treated by medication that helps you to absorb food normally. Also, your pancreas may not produce enough insulin, the hormone responsible for lowering your blood sugar level, so you may have to cut down carbohydrates and sugars from your diet or take tablets to lower your blood sugar.
- **Kidney** – it is uncommon for a kidney to be affected as we will ensure that the dose to the kidneys is as low as possible.
- **Small bowel (duodenum)** – this may become scarred following treatment. This can lead to a long-term change in bowel habit – either constipation or diarrhoea. If this happens, surgery may be necessary.
- **Stomach** – occasionally the stomach can develop an ulcer (peptic ulcer) and there is a risk that an ulcer may perforate (tear).

Remember these are possible side effects and you may not experience any of them.

Follow up after your treatment

We will usually see you in clinic four weeks after the end of your treatment. We will discuss further follow up at that time.

Please make sure you ask any questions that you have and that you feel comfortable with what you have been told.

Contact details

Your consultant is _____

If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, you can contact your Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS).

Alternatively, please contact:



The Royal Marsden switchboard

0208 642 6011

and ask to speak to your Consultant's secretary. We can then arrange for one of the team to speak with you.

You may also 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

020 8915 6018

(Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm)

