

**Patient
Information**

Radiotherapy for cancer of the oesophagus (gullet)

Introduction

The Gloucestershire Oncology Centre at Cheltenham General Hospital is a specialist centre for the treatment of cancer with patients coming here from Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire and Wales. We also have a Radiotherapy Unit at Hereford County Hospital treating patients from that region.

This information has been written for people receiving radiotherapy for cancer of the oesophagus, also called gullet. By giving you some idea of what to expect we hope to ease some of the worries that you may have. This booklet is intended as a guide to the effects that you may have from the treatment, although this may vary from one person to another. If you have any worries, however small, during or after treatment please speak to your doctor, radiographer or specialist nurse, either at your visit or by phoning the department.

When you arrive at the Oncology Department, it is important that you check in at the Radiotherapy reception so that we know you are here. Please have a seat and a radiographer or support worker will call you for marking-up or treatment.

We have male and female staff working in our department and we also train students who are always supervised.

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is the use of carefully measured doses of radiation to treat disease, usually cancer.

Radiotherapy works by destroying cancer cells in the area that is treated. Although normal cells can be damaged by radiotherapy, they can usually repair themselves.

Radiotherapy can cure some cancers and can also reduce the chance of a cancer coming back after surgery. It may also be used to control a cancer or improve the symptoms of it. You will

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not be radioactive.

The machine used to give you radiotherapy treatment is called a linear accelerator. Staff who deliver your treatment are specially trained in the delivery of radiotherapy treatment.

For female patients, if there is a possibility that you might be pregnant, please inform your doctor or radiographer when you arrive as there may be a risk to your unborn child. It is also important to avoid becoming pregnant during your course of treatment.

Radiotherapy may be used as a treatment on its own or with other treatments such as chemotherapy, hormone therapy and surgery.

Other treatments

Surgery

If you have had surgery it may have involved biopsy or removal of the cancer – radiotherapy can be used after either type of operation.

Chemotherapy

This may be given before or after surgery. It is often completed before starting radiotherapy but may sometimes be given alongside.

If you are having chemotherapy alongside radiotherapy your chemotherapy nurse/doctor will ensure you have all the information you need and will see you regularly for blood tests.

Treatment schedules

Most patients receive their treatment as an outpatient and travel to the department for their appointment. When receiving radiotherapy for cancer of the oesophagus/gullet, you may receive between 1 and 6 weeks of treatment. Treatment is usually given daily but not on weekends or Bank Holidays.

Based on a number of factors, your consultant will decide how many treatments you will receive. The decision is not a reflection of how 'good or bad' the outcome following treatment

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is likely to be. Please ask your doctor or radiographer if you are at all worried by this.

Transport

Most patients arrange their own transport – either driving themselves or a friend or relative bringing them to hospital. An exemption parking permit is available on application, valid for the duration of the treatment. Please ask at the Radiotherapy Reception on arrival. In some cases, we may be able to arrange hospital transport for you, but we need to know in advance, as this may affect your appointment times.

There are a limited number of hostel rooms at Cheltenham General Hospital available for self-caring patients who have long distances to travel. Please ask at your planning appointment if you would like more information.

Planning your radiotherapy treatment

In order to plan your treatment, a Computerised Tomography (CT) planning scan will be carried out at the Radiotherapy Department at Cheltenham General Hospital.

Whilst you may have had previous CT scans, we need to scan you whilst you are lying in the position required for your treatment. This scan is used specifically for the planning of your radiotherapy treatment.

The CT scan is very quick, only taking about 10 minutes, but please follow any instructions given in the appointment letter as it may mean you need to arrive in the department earlier than your scan appointment time. It may be necessary to use contrast for your CT scan, this involves injecting a dye into your veins during your CT scan – this enables the area to be treated to be seen more clearly.

The radiographers will explain the procedure to you. You will be asked to remove the clothing from above your waist. The radiographers will try to maintain your dignity and keep you covered as much as possible.

There are two ways of positioning you for your treatment:

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This scan may be carried out with you lying on your back with your arms above your head holding on to a support. The radiographers will make you as comfortable as possible in this position and will draw some marks on your skin to identify where the scan needs to image



So that the radiographers can see the location of the marks on the scan, they will place thin of wire over them. The radiographers will then have to leave the room for a few minutes while you are being scanned but they will be watching you all the time through a window.

Planning CT scan

Whilst they are out of the room, the couch you are lying on will move through the scanner. It is important to remember to breathe normally during the whole procedure, but otherwise to keep as still as possible.

As the marks on your skin will wash off, once the scan is complete, the radiographers will ask your permission to do 3 permanent tattoo dots. The tattoos are small and look like dark freckles. The tattoos give the radiographers precise points from which to accurately align your treatment.

Position 2

Depending on the exact area to be treated it may be necessary to wear a plastic mask that covers your chin, neck and shoulders. This will be discussed prior to your CT appointment. Both of these methods help you to lie still and allow us to accurately plan your treatment.

The radiographers will explain in detail what is involved in making your mask when you arrive for your appointment.

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If you need to wear a mask, you will be asked to remove any clothing from around your neck and shoulders; this is to ensure the mask fits well and to prevent your clothes becoming wet.



The mask is made from a sheet of plastic mesh. This is immersed in warm water and then becomes soft. Once it is softened the radiographers will shake off the excess water and gently place it over your face and neck.

Making a mask

You will feel them gently moulding it to the shape of your face and neck.

It is very important that you remain still whilst this is happening; some people find it a strange experience but it doesn't hurt and you can breathe whilst wearing the mask.

The mask will take about ten minutes to dry and set, during which we will stay in the room with you. The next step is to mark up your mask ready for treatment. This will be done via a CT scan as described earlier.

Specialist radiographers carry out all of your planning and treatment appointments. A doctor may not be available at any of these appointments unless you have urgent issues to discuss.

After we have completed the CT planning scan, we will give you your appointments for the course of treatment. If they are not available someone will contact you as soon as possible. It is therefore important we have all your contact details available.

What happens during treatment?

- A radiographer will explain your treatment and its side effects to you, also answering any questions you may have before your first treatment. You may have a relative or friend with you for this discussion

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- Before your treatment, you will be called through from the waiting room and you will be shown where to sit outside your treatment room



Radiotherapy treatment on a linac

When the room is ready for you, you will be taken into the room and asked to lie on the treatment couch as you did during your planning session. This will either be with your arms above your head or wearing your mask.

You will be asked to remove your clothing from above your waist if this is what you did for your CT scan. The radiographers will cover you up whenever possible to ensure your dignity is maintained

- The radiographers will then position the couch and treatment machine
- It may be necessary to draw over the small permanent dots with a pen each time you have treatment so the radiographers can see them when the treatment room lights are dimmed
- The radiographers may need to move you to line up the marks that were put on your skin or your mask during the planning session; this ensures you are in the correct position for your treatment
- The machines are large and you may find them a little alarming at first.

The radiographers will only leave the room to switch the treatment on once you are in the correct position and they are sure you are alright

- Parts of the machine may come quite close, but you will feel no pain or discomfort
- A closed circuit television on the control desk means the radiographers can see you at all times during your treatment. They also have an intercom system and can talk to you from

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outside the room

- The treatment lasts a few minutes and there is nothing to see or feel – you will hear a buzzing sound when the machine is on. You should breathe normally
- The radiographers may enter the room during your treatment to move the machine to the correct position for the next part of your treatment, or the machine may be moved from outside of the room
- You will be told when your treatment has finished and you can get off the couch. The whole procedure will last from 15 to 20 minutes
- It is important that you stay still during your treatment, but the radiographers will tell you what to do if you need to cough, sneeze or move during your treatment
- Once your treatment is completed, you may dress and leave the department
- On certain days of treatment, the radiographers will take images (X-ray pictures) or scans to ensure your treatment is accurate. These show us the position of your treatment but cannot tell us how you are responding.

Side effects of radiotherapy

Radiotherapy is an important and effective treatment for many different cancers including those found in the oesophagus or gullet. To be effective, the radiotherapy dose needs to be high enough to kill the cancer cells. Your doctor will have already discussed the treatment with you, how many sessions may be required and any side effects that you may experience.

Side effects develop because normal healthy cells close to the tumour cannot be avoided and they react to the radiotherapy. However, normal cells recover quickly whilst cancerous cells do not. Each patient's treatment is individual and you may experience some or all of the following side effects to differing degrees.

You may find it helps to get plenty of rest and sleep during the course of your treatment, especially if you start to get tired. It is important that you continue with your normal activities and routines as much as possible. Try to find a sensible balance between rest and activity. Smoking during the course of treatment may worsen your side effects, so try to avoid this.

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Cutting down will help if you cannot stop completely. Please ask a radiographer if you would like extra support.

Friends and family often offer to help, accepting this can give you support as well as allowing them to feel involved with your treatment.

Effects during treatment

Acute or early side effects are usually temporary, building up during treatment and usually continue for 7 to 10 days after your radiotherapy finishes. These usually settle down 4 to 6 weeks after treatment is completed, although they can last longer in some people. The following is a general guide to some of the effects you may experience but all patients are different.

Tiredness

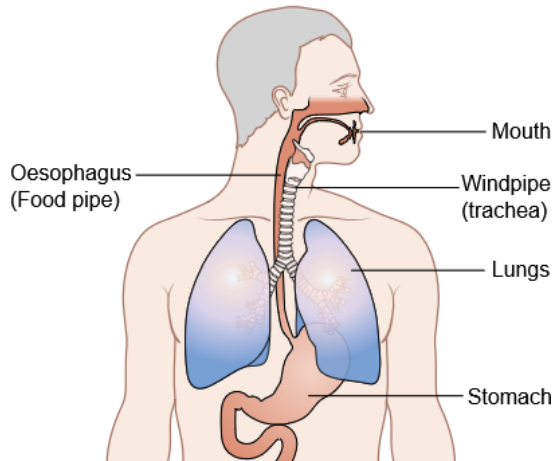
Some patients notice they feel more tired than usual during the course of their treatment, often after 2 to 3 weeks. Travelling to the department may also add to this tiredness. If you have to get up more often in the night to pass urine this may add to your tiredness.

Tiredness can last for a number of weeks after radiotherapy has finished. Some patients find that although once their treatment finishes they feel better, it can take a number of months before they feel back to normal.

Because of where the oesophagus is situated within the body several other side effects may be noticed:

Swallowing and indigestion

As treatment progresses you may find it becomes increasingly sore or difficult to swallow. In some cases, this may have been why you went to your doctor in the first place and it may seem as if the radiotherapy is making it worse.

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Some patients will have had a stent or tube inserted into the oesophagus before radiotherapy in order to help them swallow. Some of the side effects you may experience are that it may become more difficult to swallow solid food and pain, discomfort or soreness on swallowing and indigestion or reflux.

The oesophagus

This may mean that you cannot eat your normal foods or your normal amount of food – and you may lose weight.

You will be weighed at the start of your course of treatment and weekly after that so we can monitor this. It may be that you need to concentrate on having softer foods – or mashed/pureed foods. Sometimes it is helpful to take supplements in the form of drinks. You will routinely see a dietitian during your course of radiotherapy who will advise you on how to maintain your nutritional intake – this is important to help your body recover more quickly from side effects.

Let your radiographers know when you notice any problems starting as they can also offer advice and medication to help.

Cough and shortness of breath

Because the oesophagus lies directly behind the trachea/windpipe and between the lungs it is not unusual to develop a cough as a side effect of your radiotherapy treatment. You may also notice you become more short of breath. Again, please let your radiographers know if you notice this happening.

You will be seen at intervals in the review clinic to assess your side effects and give you a further opportunity to ask questions and discuss any concerns you may have. These appointments will be with a specially trained radiographer. You may also need to see a doctor during your treatment and your radiographers will arrange this.

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Chronic or late side effects are less common and develop months or even years after treatment. These are often permanent but treatments are usually available which can help.

Your doctor will have discussed with you the possibility of potential long-term side effects occurring after your treatment has finished.

There is a chance that you may experience long term scarring or fibrosis of the gullet.

This can make swallowing difficult. In some cases patients may need oesophageal dilatation which is where the oesophagus/gullet is stretched to widen it and allow easier swallowing.

Some patients notice that they get short of breath more easily or develop a cough.

The likelihood of these happening is often small, and the advantage of receiving radiotherapy is believed to outweigh the risks of long-term problems.

After treatment has finished

On the day of your last treatment, the radiographers will give you specific advice on what to do now your treatment has finished, including how to manage any side effects and what to expect. Any side effects that have developed during treatment usually wear off within a few weeks.

It is important to remember that the full benefits of the treatment can take a number of weeks to be felt.

You will be also be given your first follow up appointment. This may be at Cheltenham General Hospital or at a hospital closer to your home, usually between 2 and 6 weeks after your radiotherapy has finished.

This time is given to allow the treatment to continue working, side effects to begin to settle and for you to recover. You will be seen by your oncologist or a member of their team who will want to check that your

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side effects are settling down and discuss with you what further appointments may be needed.

Although all patients are glad to have finished their course of radiotherapy, it is quite normal to feel anxious as to what may happen next. Please do not feel abandoned. If you have any worries regarding your treatment or side effects, you can phone the radiographers who treated you.

The department is open on weekdays – please try to call between 10:00am and 4:00pm. You can also contact your GP if you have any other worries concerning your disease and/or treatment.

Contact information**Radiotherapy Reception**

Tel: 0300 422 4147

Monday to Friday, 8:00am to 5:00pm

Radiotherapy Appointments

Tel: 0300 422 4471

Monday to Friday, 10:00am to 3:00pm

Your treatment machine:

Telephone number:

Your treatment team:

Further information**FOCUS Cancer Information Centre**

Oncology Outpatients Department
Cheltenham General Hospital

Tel: 0300 422 4414

Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 4:30pm

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As well as information on treatments and support groups, the centre advises on how to obtain wigs and can supply a list of companies who may be able to help with holiday insurance. They also sell herbal sweets for nausea.

Aromatherapy, massage and reflexology are available to patients and carers. Appointments can be booked through the information centre.

Maggie's Cancer Caring Centre

The local Maggie's Cancer Caring Centre is located close to Cheltenham General hospital and offers support services. For further information visit the website, call or pop in to see them.

Maggie's

The Lodge
Cheltenham General Hospital
College Baths Road
Cheltenham
GL53 7QB

Tel: 01242 250 611

Website: www.maggiescentres.org

Cancer Information and Support Service

Macmillan Renton Unit
Hereford County Hospital

Tel: 01432 355444 ask for ext. 5459

Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4:30pm

Email: hereford.cancerinfoandsupport@nhs.net

The service offers confidential one-to-one support as well as information on all aspects of living with cancer and its treatments to anyone affected by cancer. This includes information on diet and nutrition, coping with hair loss and alternative headwear and benefits advice. Free internet access is available. Many of the resources are available in different languages and formats and are suitable for people with special needs.

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