

# Information for patients and carers

## Radiotherapy for Head and Neck Cancer

A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consisting of three overlapping, wavy bands of blue. The top band is a light blue, the middle is a medium blue, and the bottom is a dark blue.

## Why do I need Treatment?

This leaflet is designed for people who have been diagnosed with cancer in the head and neck area. If you have recently been diagnosed with head and neck cancer, it is normal to experience a wide range of emotions.

Your partner, family or friends might also find this leaflet useful to understand what you are currently experiencing so that they can help to support you.

Whatever you may be feeling, try talking about it with someone who specialises in dealing with this condition such as your consultant, consultant radiographer or clinical nurse specialist. They will listen, be able to answer any questions you may have about your condition and, if you wish, can put you in touch with other professionals or support agencies.

## What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is a specialist treatment that uses precise, carefully measured doses of radiation to treat cancer.

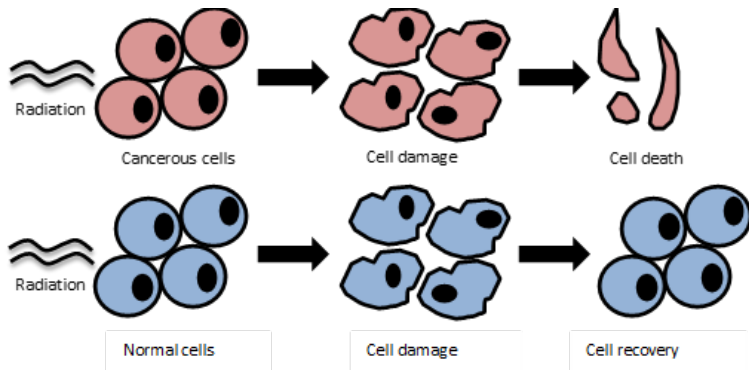
Treatment is given by highly trained radiographers, using specialised machines known as linear accelerators. The radiographers and planning staff work closely with your consultant to plan and deliver your treatment.

## How does radiotherapy work?

Radiotherapy uses high energy x-rays to treat head and neck cancer. The X-ray beams are directed at the treatment area and cause damage to cells in the treatment area.

Normal healthy cells can recover from this damage, however abnormal cancer cells cannot.

Radiotherapy is therefore given to kill the cancer cells in the targeted area and reduce the chances of your cancer recurring or delay its progression. The treatment itself is painless.



## Will I be radioactive?

If you are having external beam radiotherapy you **will not be radioactive**. It is safe to be in close contact with people, including pregnant people, babies and children.

## Combinations of treatment

The treatment you are offered will depend on multiple factors. There are different types of treatment options, below are typical treatment combinations. Treatment options are individualised for each person:

- Concurrent chemo-radiotherapy, this means that radiotherapy and chemotherapy are given alongside each other.
- Postoperative radiotherapy. This is when radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy treatment are given after surgery.
- Radiotherapy alone as a primary treatment option. Not all patients are able to have chemotherapy and/or surgery, or in some cases chemotherapy and/or surgery are not required.
- Targeted immunotherapy treatment. This treatment can be used in combination with other treatments.

## When will my radiotherapy start?

After your consultant or consultant radiographer has discussed your treatment options with you, and you have consented to go ahead with treatment you will receive an appointment to attend your radiotherapy planning scan appointment.

You will be given your first radiotherapy treatment appointment when you attend for your planning scan.

The planning scan appointment is used to plan your radiotherapy treatment; this can take anywhere from a few days up to 3 weeks. Please do not be alarmed if you feel there is a long time between these appointments, this is due to the complex nature of the planning process.

You may need to go to the dentist before you attend for your planning scan, the dentist may need to remove any teeth they think may cause complications during the treatment. Your consultant or consultant radiographer will advise you if you need to visit the dentist.

If you require certain times and/or hospital transport, please let a member of staff know before you start treatment. The radiotherapy appointment team will do their best to accommodate your request, however this cannot always be guaranteed.

## Before your treatment

### Pre treatment

At the planning appointment you will have a CT scan of your head and neck area. The treatment planning team use this scan to accurately plan your radiotherapy treatment, whilst ensuring that surrounding areas close to the treatment area do not receive more radiation than necessary.

You may need to have a dye injection for the scan, known as contrast. Your radiographer will discuss this with you if it is required. Please note that if you need to have the dye injection, we ask that you stay in the department for up to thirty minutes afterwards. This is to ensure you are feeling ok after the dye injection, this is not required for treatment.

### During the scan

You will need to have a mask made for the planning scan and treatment. The mask is made from a specialised thermoplastic material which turns soft when heated in a water bath.

The radiographers will drape this over your face, neck and shoulders and mould it to the contours of your face and body while it cools and hardens.

The mask is designed to ensure your head and neck remains perfectly still, which is important to guarantee accuracy for treatment. The

radiographers will take the CT scan whilst you are in the mask, and there is nothing to see or feel during the scan.

## Radiotherapy Treatment

Before your first radiotherapy session, a radiographer will discuss the treatment process and answer any questions you may have, as well as giving you your full list of appointments

It is very important that you do not miss any of your radiotherapy treatments, as it can make the treatment less effective. If you are feeling too ill to attend your treatment, please call the department and speak to a member of the team to see if we can assist.

For your radiotherapy treatment you will lie down in the same position as when you came for the planning scan. The radiographers will start by putting the mask over your head and neck. The radiographers will then begin to position you for treatment.

Once the radiographers have completed their checks, they leave the room to start the treatment. Only the patient can be in the treatment room when the machine is delivering treatment, but staff will monitor you via CCTV.

The radiographers will firstly complete a CT scan, to verify your position and you may feel the bed move as they make minor adjustments to ensure you are in the perfect position for treatment. Once the radiographers are happy with your position, they will begin treatment from outside of the room, this will only take several minutes and there is nothing to see or feel during treatment. The whole treatment process takes approximately 15 minutes.

## Treatment reviews

Whilst you are having your radiotherapy treatments, you will have scheduled review clinics with your consultant or consultant radiographer, within the radiotherapy department. These review clinics are for you to discuss any concerns or side effects that you may be experiencing from treatment. The Head and Neck team will be able to give advice and where appropriate prescribe medication. The review clinics are scheduled on specific times and days and will be scheduled on your treatment appointment list.

## Blood tests

For this treatment, your consultant will request that you get your bloods checked at least once per week.

The team will discuss this with you when you start treatment. Blood tests can be done at the blood clinic located near the main entrance of the hospital.

## Staff you will meet

We are a mixed gender department and treatment will be given by male and female staff members.

Royal Preston Hospital is a teaching hospital which means that we train and support undergraduate and postgraduate radiotherapy students and medical students. Students take an active part in treatments and are closely monitored by qualified staff.

## Side effects

Most people will experience side effects of radiotherapy, although the severity will vary from person to person.

Side effects don't usually happen straight away but start to develop around a week into your treatment, and they will continue after treatment finishes.

You will be given advice by your consultant/ consultant radiographer and treatment radiographers on how to manage any side effects.

If you are having other treatments, e.g. chemotherapy you may experience side effects alongside radiotherapy, if you are suffering with chemotherapy related side effects, you can contact the **oncology helpline on 01772 523205**

## Acute side effects

- Tiredness
- Painful and difficult swallowing
- Soreness from ulceration in mouth, throat, lips and tongue
- Loss of taste and appetite
- Thick secretions in mouth and throat
- Hoarse voice
- Skin redness/ soreness

## Diet

This will be discussed and monitored at your weekly review clinic by your consultant/ consultant radiographer or dietician.



## Smoking and alcohol consumption

Smoking increases the severity of side effects experienced during radiotherapy. There are contact details for the Lancashire and South Cumbria “Quit Squad” at the end of this resource.

Drinking alcohol will cause irritation to the mouth and oesophagus, if you feel like you need help to eliminate or reduce the amount of alcohol you are drinking, a contact number and website can be found at the end of this leaflet where you can get support and advice. Alternatively speak to any member of your treatment team and they will be able to refer you for the support you need.

## Oral hygiene

Maintain good oral hygiene is very important during your radiotherapy treatment. Brushing your teeth twice a day with a soft toothbrush, using mouthwashes provided by the head and neck team and gargling with salt water can significantly help reduce some of the complications caused by radiotherapy treatment.

Avoid using any oral hygiene product that has not been specifically recommended or prescribed by your head and neck team as some products can irritate your mouth and make your side effects worse.

## Late side effects

The late effects or long-term effects of radiotherapy can occur several months and years after the radiotherapy has finished.

This is dependent on your treatment site and will be monitored and managed at your routine follow up appointments.

## After your treatment

You will have a follow-up appointment with your local head and neck team shortly after finishing radiotherapy, this is to discuss any concerns you have following treatment and to ensure you have enough medications and supplements for the next few weeks as your side effects progress and slowly start to diminish.

You will receive an appointment through the post to see your consultant or consultant radiographer around six to eight weeks after completion of your radiotherapy.

It is important to be aware that any side effects experienced during treatment are likely to get worse before they get better. Short term side effects reach their peak approximately two weeks after finishing treatment. These should have significantly improved within 8 weeks. Some people take a little longer than this to recover.

Allow yourself time to physically and mentally recover from your treatment. Treatment for cancer can be emotionally wearing and it is important you address your emotional wellbeing as well as your physical state.

There is a Macmillan team available every weekday in the Rosemere building at Royal Preston Hospital, ask any members of staff to point you in the right direction. You can find their contact details at the end of this leaflet.

## Contact details

Should you require further advice or information please contact:

Radiotherapy Reception **(01772) 522923**

Appointments **(01772) 522931**

Transport **(01772) 522295**

**If you would like to watch a short information video about radiotherapy, please scan the QR code below.**



## Sources of further information

[www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk](http://www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk)

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

[www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)

## Stop smoking services

<https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/your-health-and-wellbeing/keeping-physically-healthy/stop-smoking/>

## Macmillan at Rosemere Cancer Centre

<https://tinyurl.com/38z3d2fy>

**(01772) 523709**

Lancashire Teaching Hospitals is a smoke-free site. Smoking is not permitted anywhere on any of our premises, either inside or outside the buildings. Our staff will ask you about your smoking status when you come to hospital and will offer you support and advice about stopping smoking this will include Nicotine Replacement Therapy to help manage your symptoms of withdrawal and the opportunity to speak to a nurse or advisor from the specialist Tobacco and Alcohol Care Team.

Please ask if you would like help in understanding this information. This information can be made available in large print and in other languages.

[www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/cancer-patient-information-leaflets](http://www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/cancer-patient-information-leaflets)

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