



## A patient guide to superficial radiotherapy to the skin

This leaflet is for people who have been recommended to receive radiotherapy to the skin. It will highlight the important details that you will have already discussed with your doctor. This leaflet is intended to be a guide as details and side effects of treatment will vary from patient to patient.

### What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy uses high energy X-rays to target and kill cancer cells in a specific area. Radiotherapy is similar to having an X-ray as you will not feel anything whilst it is being given and it does not hurt, but you do have to lie still for a few minutes.

Treatment is normally given in short daily treatment sessions, Monday to Friday. The number of treatments required ranges from 1–20 and depends on the site, size and depth of the area being treated. A typical course involves one treatment a day, over five consecutive working days.

There are two types of radiotherapy used to treat skin cancer; superficial X-rays and electrons. Superficial X-rays and electrons are both types of radiotherapy that do not travel far into your skin before they are absorbed.

This is why they are chosen to treat skin cancers.

The type of radiotherapy chosen to treat you depends on the size, site and depth of skin that needs treatment, and will be explained to you before start your treatment.

Unfortunately, some healthy cells within the treated area can also be affected, resulting in some side effects. The side effects will be discussed at a later point in this leaflet. The treatment will not make you radioactive so it is safe to be around children and other people after your treatment.

Your radiotherapy is delivered by radiographers, both male and female. We are a teaching hospital and have student radiographers in the department everyday who are supervised by trained staff.

### Why do I need radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy can be used as the main treatment for some skin cancers. This treatment is usually recommended for basal cell cancer or squamous cell cancer of the skin and sometimes lymphoma (cancer that starts in lymphocytes cells) involving the skin.

### What are the benefits of radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy can be used to treat some skin cancers. For most patients the benefit of radiotherapy will be to potentially cure or improve the control or the symptoms of your cancer. Your doctor will discuss this with you in more detail in clinic.

## **Are there any alternative treatments to radiotherapy?**

Skin cancer may also be treated with surgery, cryotherapy (destroying cancer cells by freezing them) or topical chemotherapy (using anti-cancer drugs to destroy cells). It may be that you receive a combination of these treatments and your doctor will discuss this with you.

## **What will happen if I do not have treatment?**

If you choose not to have radiotherapy, your symptoms could get worse; the cancer may grow or come back. Please discuss this with the doctor.

## **Patients with pacemakers**

Please let the doctor or radiographers know if you have a pacemaker before starting treatment. This may affect how the treatment is given.

## **Pregnancy**

It is extremely important that you are not pregnant or become pregnant during your course of radiotherapy. Even a small amount of radiation may harm an unborn foetus (baby) so it is very important to let the radiographers know at once if you think there is even a small possibility that you may be pregnant before being exposed to any radiation.

## **What happens before my radiotherapy begins?**

After you have given your consent for radiotherapy, you will receive an appointment to attend the radiotherapy department at the Cancer Centre, Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham. When you arrive please report to the Cancer Centre reception desk.

A doctor will see you in clinic to discuss your proposed treatment. They will need to place some pen marks on your skin to indicate the area that is to be treated.

Some patients will also need to attend our mould room for a special mask to be made of the area which is to be treated. This is to ensure the treatment can be delivered as accurately as possible. When the mould is made, the doctor will need to check this against your skin to make sure they are happy with the fit.

Once the doctor has checked the mould, treatment can then be planned and calculated. This planning process takes approximately an hour. During this time, someone will show you where you need to go for your radiotherapy and tell you what time you can expect your treatment.

You may be asked to keep any pen marks on that the doctor has drawn on your skin. This is so the radiographers can ensure they treat the correct area so please try not to wash them off. If you are having treatment the same day as the planning please expect your visit to take approximately two to three hours.

If you are not starting treatment on the same day as the planning you will be given an appointment for the start of your radiotherapy before going home.

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The Radiotherapy Department is open from 08:00–18:00 and you will be offered treatment times

within these hours. If you need a certain appointment on a specific day it is best to ask at the earliest available opportunity once you have started radiotherapy to avoid disappointment. It may not always be possible to accommodate requests as we are a very busy department.

If you require hospital transport for your radiotherapy treatment please discuss this with the radiographers on your first visit.

### **What happens when I arrive for my first treatment session?**

The radiographers will come and talk to you before your treatment and explain the treatment procedure to you. It also gives you an opportunity to ask any further questions you may have regarding the treatment, side effects and appointment times.

When the radiographers are ready to take you in for your treatment they will call you in from the waiting room.

You will be asked to lie on the couch and the radiographers will bring part of the machine (the applicator) towards you to touch the area needing treatment.

The applicator will be positioned to touch either the pen marks you have on your skin or the mould which has been made for your treatment.

When you are in the correct position, the radiographers will leave the room to switch the machine on. The radiographers will operate the machine from outside the treatment room, in the control area.

They can hear and see you at all times so if you need assistance, just call out or raise your hand. For your own safety, please do not try to get off the bed as the machine is very close and the couch may be high off the floor.

When the machine is switched on you may hear some buzzing and beeping noises. When treatment has finished please remain in position until the radiographers enter the treatment room and tell you that everything is finished. This is for your own safety. Your first treatment appointment normally takes around 20 minutes.

You may be asked to keep any pen marks on that the doctor has drawn on your skin. This is so the radiographers can ensure they treat the correct area so please do not try to wash them off.

### **What happens at my other treatment appointments?**

When you arrive please put your appointment card in the box outside your treatment room. Appointments may take around 15–20 minutes.

### **CCTV monitors**

The treatment rooms are monitored during your preparation for treatment, positioning and treatment delivery by television cameras. This is part of ensuring the accuracy of your treatment and your safety and wellbeing in the rooms at all times.

We assure you that the camera image feed is live and it is not possible to make a recording. The images are viewable on screens situated in the machine control areas. The control areas are only

accessible by authorised radiotherapy staff, some who may not be directly involved with your care at that time.

If you have any concerns about your privacy or dignity that you have not already discussed then please do not hesitate to highlight your concerns during the information discussion with the radiographers at your first treatment appointment.

## **Is there anything that I need to do whilst receiving my radiotherapy treatment course?**

- Please keep any pen marks on your skin and do not wash these off between treatments
- If you are diabetic please ensure you bring your insulin and some food each time you attend in case there are any delays
- We also recommend you bring any medication you are required to take regularly e.g. painkillers
- Avoid shaving the area that is being treated as the friction will irritate the skin
- If you are having treatment to your scalp, avoid using hair dyes, shampoo and set hair treatments during your treatment

## **Will I see a doctor during my treatment course?**

Most patients that are attending appointments for less than two weeks do not see a doctor during treatment.

If you do need to see a doctor the radiographers will organise for you to attend a clinic in the Cancer Centre. Your treatment appointment time on this day will coincide with the doctors' clinic so that you do not have to make two visits in one day.

Following completion of your radiotherapy you will usually be discharged back to the care of either your GP or dermatologist at your local hospital. Your follow-up time will vary according to your skin condition but may be as long as six months later. If you have any problems before your follow-up appointment, please contact your GP.

## **Are there any side effects?**

When you were consented for your radiotherapy your doctor will have explained the potential side effects.

The most common side effects are often called early or acute side effects. They can occur during the course of radiotherapy treatment and may continue for a few weeks after treatment has finished. Side effects which occur six months or longer after treatment has finished are called long-term side effects.

If you have any questions about side effects, please ask any member of the treatment team.

## **What are the possible early (acute) side effects?**

These early (acute) side effects are usually mild and normally occur towards the end of your radiotherapy treatment. They are generally at their worst in the first 10 to 14 days after treatment has finished. They should gradually improve over the next few weeks and will have settled by the time you attend your radiotherapy follow-up appointment.

### **Sore skin**

Your skin may become red and sore in the area being treated. The skin is likely to become pink, sore and itchy about a week after the first treatment and this may last for two to three weeks after the treatment course has finished.

### **Lining of the nose**

If your treatment is to the skin of the nose, then a small part of the internal lining of your nose may also be affected. This may cause mild nose bleeds after you blow your nose. This can occur for up to two weeks after your treatment course has been completed.

### **Inside the mouth**

If your treatment is close to the lips, a small area of the lining of the mouth may become sore or crack and blister. It may also bleed a little and this can occur for a couple of weeks after your treatment course has finished.

### **Scabbing of the treated area**

The treated area may form a scab or crusting around the edges. If the radiographers think the scab could get in the way of the radiation due to its thickness, they may remove it before treatment.

The scab will fall off after treatment and a smaller one will form several times over. This is all part of the normal healing process after radiotherapy.

### **Bleeding and weeping**

The area may bleed or weep. The area can be cleaned using warm plain water and gently patting dry. Do not rub it dry. To help stop any bleeding, apply light pressure using a clean, dry dressing and hold until the bleeding stops.

### **Hair loss**

Your hair will fall out in the area of skin that is being treated. For example, the scalp, a beard, eyebrow or chest hair. This usually occurs two to three weeks after your first treatment and can be

permanent. Hair will only fall out in the area treated so the whole beard or hair on your scalp will not fall out.

## **What late side effects may I experience?**

These side effects may occur months or years after finishing your course of radiotherapy:

- The skin that has received radiotherapy may appear paler than the surrounding skin
- Small veins may become visible in the treated area
- Hair loss may be permanent in the treated area
- The area treated will be much more sensitive to the sun in future years

## **Skin care during your radiotherapy**

A skin reaction may appear at any time but usually begins about 10 days after starting treatment. It can last 2–3 weeks after treatment has finished.

You may notice the following in the area you are having treatment:

- Your skin gradually becoming pinker or darker, depending on your skin colour
- Your skin may feel itchy and sore
- Your skin may blister or bleed and a scab may form

The radiographers will advise you on how to look after your skin.

## **How can I help myself?**

It may not be possible to stop a skin reaction but by following this advice may help you feel more comfortable.

This only applies to the skin in the area being treated:

- if the area being treated gets wet gently pat dry but please do not wash any pen marks off
- avoid rubbing the area
- avoid/reduce shaving in the area being treated
- avoid sticky tape on the area (such as Elastoplast™ or Micropore™)
- Avoid using products containing alcohol on the skin in the area being treated. This includes makeup, hair dye, perfumes and aftershave (It is important to leave the area free from perming lotions and colours for at least three to six months after your treatment course has finished)
- Avoid swimming during treatment as it may irritate your skin
- Avoid sun exposure and protect the area from direct sunlight. You could wear a brimmed hat and/or cover up with clothing. The area treated will be much more sensitive to the sun in future years so remember to be careful in the sun. Use a sunscreen with a minimum UVB sun protection with added UVA protection of SPF factor 30

Your treatment team will talk to you about your usual daily skin care routine. They will let you know if any changes are advised. Please talk to them about any worries you have.

After your treatment has finished, your skin will continue to be more sensitive. Your reaction may

worsen over the next 10 to 14 days before starting to improve. Most patients find their skin has healed around four weeks after treatment finishes. If the skin has broken or has been bleeding or scabbed healing may take longer than this.

## **Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns whilst on treatment?**

All our staff are here to make sure your treatment goes as smoothly as possible and to support you through this difficult period. If you have any questions about your treatment or side effects, please do not hesitate to ask your doctor or any of the radiographers for advice.

The Review Radiographers can be contacted for advice between 08:45–17:00, Mon–Fri on **0121 371 3553**.

During your treatment and for up to six weeks after your treatment has finished if you need urgent advice due to side effects or are feeling unwell, please contact the oncology hotline on **07789 651543**.

In the event that your call is not answered, please leave a message stating your name, hospital number, contact telephone number and short message.

## **What do I need to do when I have finished my treatment?**

Once you have completed your treatment, the acute side effects may continue for a few weeks even though you are no longer receiving treatment. Continue with the advice that was given to you during your radiotherapy until the side effects stop. If you are unsure of what to do, please ask a radiographer or your doctor before you finish your treatment.

Following completion of your radiotherapy you will usually be discharged back to the care of either your GP or your dermatologist at your local hospital. Follow-up time will vary according to your skin condition but may be as long as six months later. If you have any problems before your follow-up appointment, please contact your GP.

## **Further information**

The Cancer Centre has an information room called the Patrick Room. They can provide information and support. Please call **0121 371 3539**.

### **You may also find these organisations helpful:**

Macmillan Cancer Support: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)  
Tel: **0808 8080000**

Cancer Research UK: [www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer)

## **Travelling to your treatment appointments**

## **By train**

University Station is the closest train station to the hospital and is only a 5–10 minute walk away. There is also a shuttle bus running from the train station to the Cancer Centre, for those patients who have difficulty walking.

## **By car**

Car parking in Car Park D is free for patients attending for daily radiotherapy treatment. Car Park D is located directly opposite the doors to the Cancer Centre. The postcode for your satellite navigation device is B15 2GW.

If you do drive, please bring in the ticket you have taken to access the car park and the radiographers will exchange this for a prepaid one, so you may exit the car park without charge.

## **Hospital transport**

Hospital transport is only provided if you have a medical need that stops you from using private or public transport.

If you need any help/advice or to book transport please contact Patient Transport Services on: **0800 035 6511** (Monday–Friday 08.00–18:00)

## **Bromley wing**

If you do not wish to travel, you may arrange to stay in the Bromley Wing at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. It is comfortable accommodation with meals provided from Monday– Friday for people who are able to look after themselves.

Outside treatment times, you are free to entertain yourself, have visitors or go out.

Accommodation here is free and can be arranged by contacting the Bromley Wing on **0121 371 4506**.

## **Radiotherapy contact numbers**

Patrick Room – Cancer Centre, Queen Elizabeth Hospital

Information and support to people with cancer and their families: Telephone: **0121 371 3537/9**

## **Radiotherapy Review Radiographers**

For information and advice regarding side effects:

Telephone: **0121 371 3553**

Monday–Friday, 08:00–17:00

## **Oncology hotline**

For urgent medical problems out–of–hours when attending for treatment and up to six weeks after radiotherapy or chemotherapy has finished:

Telephone: **07789 651543**

## **Radiotherapy treatment rooms – direct telephone numbers**

- Room 1: 0121 371 5703
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- Room 2: 0121 371 5076
- Room 4: 0121 371 5090 (tomotherapy)
- Room 5: 0121 371 5085
- Room 6: 0121 371 5098 (tomotherapy)
- Room 7: 0121 371 5084
- Room 10: 0121 371 5079
- Room 11: 0121 371 5080

Please use the space below to write down any questions you may have and bring this with you to your next appointment.

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**Radiotherapy**

Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham  
 Mindelsohn Way, Edgbaston  
 Birmingham, B15 2GW  
 Telephone: 0121 627 2000

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