



Advice to Patients on Completion of their Radiotherapy

Everyone reacts to radiotherapy differently. Side effects are different for everyone and the symptoms you may experience will depend on how much treatment you have received and the area of the body which you have had treated.

Radiotherapy only affects the part of the body that is being treated.

What happens after radiotherapy has finished?

Radiotherapy treatment continues to work in the body for around 2–3 weeks after your treatment has finished and you may still develop side effects during this time even if you did not have any side effects during your treatment. This is completely normal.

Any side effects that you have experienced during treatment may also continue for a few weeks after the treatment has finished. Sometimes, they may worsen initially but, eventually they will gradually start to subside. This can take a few weeks and is also normal.

It can take a few months before you feel fully back to your normal self and recovery time from radiotherapy does vary from person to person.

Follow-up

Most patients will have a follow up appointment with a doctor after radiotherapy treatment has finished.

The scheduling of this appointment may vary depending on what was treated but it is usually between 1 to 3 months after radiotherapy completes.

This appointment may be with your radiotherapy doctor (Oncologist) or with your original specialist at the hospital where you were first seen.

You may well have the date for this follow up appointment before you finish your radiotherapy. If you do not, you will receive your follow up appointment in the post.

Fatigue

At the end of treatment many people lack energy, motivation and feel extremely tired. This is called fatigue.

It may continue for a number of weeks after treatment has finished. This is normal. In time it will settle down.

Skin care

Your skin will continue to be more sensitive after your radiotherapy treatment has finished and any skin reaction may initially worsen in the first week or two after treatment before starting to improve.

This is because radiotherapy treatment continues to work in the body. The peak of the radiotherapy reactions can be 10–14 days after your treatment has finished.

You may develop a skin reaction during this time even if you had none during your treatment. Most patients find their skin has healed by approximately 3–4 weeks after the radiotherapy treatment finishes.

If the skin has broken or blistered, healing may take longer than this.

The radiographers who give you treatment will advise you, should you need to continue using a particular dressing or cream after the treatment is complete.

If you do need to continue to use dressings after treatment has finished, you will need to organise this with your GP. Your GP can also arrange the services of a District Nurse if appropriate.

If you have any concerns or questions about skin care or, if you feel your skin reaction is not improving, please contact the Radiotherapy Review Radiographers (contact details on leaflet) or your GP for further advice.

Swimming

It is best to avoid swimming until any skin reactions have settled as the chlorine may irritate your skin. If you do decide to swim then it is advisable to wash thoroughly after swimming and to moisturise the skin.

Sun exposure

The skin in the treatment area will always be more sensitive to the sun.

For the first 12 months after radiotherapy it is advisable to try to avoid exposing the treated area to strong sunlight as the skin is still very sensitive during this time and will easily become sunburned.

In future years we would recommend you use a sunscreen with a minimum UVB sun protection factor (SPF) of 50 and with added UVA protection.

Hair loss

Hair loss from radiotherapy only occurs in the area being treated.

If hair loss has occurred during radiotherapy, this will usually grow back within four to six months of treatment ending.

Sometimes the hair that grows back may be a slightly different colour, texture and thickness than you had before treatment. The speed and extent of hair regrowth can vary greatly from person to person.

It is advisable to avoid having your hair dyed or permed until any skin irritation has completely resolved. We would also suggest you have a skin patch test before any hair treatments.

Headaches

When the head is treated with radiotherapy it can cause headaches and frequently steroids are given to help with these symptoms during treatment.

The headaches should begin to improve once the treatment stops and then the steroid dosage can be reduced gradually.

Occasionally the headaches don't improve or may become worse. If this happens please contact your GP, consultant or specialist nurse/ radiographer who will be able to review your medication.

Nausea and vomiting

If you have experienced any nausea and vomiting during your treatment then this may continue for another 2–3 weeks.

Continue taking any anti-sickness medication prescribed to you until your symptoms subside. Repeat prescriptions should be obtained from your GP.

Loss of appetite

If you have had difficulty eating during radiotherapy this may continue for several weeks and you should not expect to eat normal quantities of food straight away.

If you were given advice from a dietician, continue to follow this advice until your symptoms improve.

If you have been prescribed dietary supplements by a dietitian during your radiotherapy then these may need to be continued via your GP once treatment has finished. The dietitian will write to your GP if this is the case.

To make up for eating less, it is important to increase the amount of calories and protein in your diet.

Use full fat products and avoid low fat and low sugar products unless otherwise advised.

Eating small, frequent meals every two hours may help your appetite to return sooner.

Concentrate on eating foods you enjoy and do not have a drink with or immediately before your meal as this will fill you up.

If your appetite has not started to improve within a few weeks of your treatment finishing, please seek further advice from your clinical nurse specialist or GP.

Diarrhoea

If you have been following a low fibre diet or taking anti-diarrhoea medication to help with diarrhoea, please continue to do so until your symptoms subside.

Repeat medication prescriptions should be obtained from your GP. When the diarrhoea has settled it is important to gradually return to eating foods with fibre again.

Bladder irritation

Radiotherapy to the pelvic area can cause irritation to the bladder and you may experience an increase in the number of times you feel the need to go to the toilet to empty your bladder.

You may also experience a stinging or burning sensation when you pass urine (cystitis).

If you have burning feeling or pain when you pass urine, the urine begins to look cloudy or smell strongly you may need to see your GP. Your GP will need to test a sample of your urine for bacteria to help confirm the diagnosis. It may be that you have a urine infection and, if your urine sample tests positive for this you may need antibiotic treatment.

Radiotherapy contacts:

Treatment review radiographers
Information and support on skin care and treatment side effects
Monday to Friday, 08:00–17:00 Tel: **0121 371 3553**

Lung specialist radiographer
Monday to Thursday, 09:00–17:00
Tel: **0121 371 3554**

Brachytherapy radiographer
Monday to Friday, 09:00–17:00 Tel: **0121 371 5086**

Oncology (cancer) hotline:

Acute Oncology Team: **07789 651543**

Please contact the team up to six weeks after treatment if you develop urgent medical problems with symptoms including;

- High temperature of 38°C (100°F) or above
- Shivering, uncontrollable shaking or flu-like symptoms
- Mouth ulcers that stop you eating or drinking
- Persistent vomiting and diarrhoea (more than four times a day)
- Difficulty breathing

You may also find these organisations helpful:

Patrick Room, Cancer Centre, Heritage Building
Information and support for people with cancer and their families:
Monday to Friday, 09:00–17:00
Tel: **0121 371 3537** or **0121 371 3539**

Macmillan

Information and support for people with cancer and their families. www.macmillan.org.uk
Tel: **0808 808 0000**

Breast Cancer Care

www.breastcancercare.org.uk

Tel: **0808 800 6000** Prostate Cancer UK

www.prostatecanceruk.org Tel: **0800 074 8383**

Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation

www.roycastle.org Tel: **0333 323 7200**

Bowel Cancer UK

www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk Tel: **020 7940 1760**

Radiotherapy

Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham

Mindelsohn Way, Edgbaston

Birmingham, B15 2GW

Telephone: 0121 371 2000

Accessibility

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