



Advice for patients undergoing radiotherapy to the head and neck

This information booklet aims to provide you with information that you have discussed at your pre-treatment appointment with the Clinical Nurse Specialist, Speech and Language Therapist and Dietitian. This booklet aims to help guide and prepare you for your radiotherapy treatment.

What side effects may I experience?

You will have discussed the side effects with the oncologist who is looking after you during your treatment. The side effects of the treatment include pain, mucositis (shedding of the lining of the skin from inside the mouth and throat), swallowing difficulties, taste changes, mouth ulcers, skin reaction and tiredness.

Pain medication

It is important to take your pain medication regularly and when you start to feel sore. If you are still in pain after taking the medications it is likely that you will need your pain medication increased by your consultant, this is expected. Taking your pain medication regularly will allow you to eat more and stay well-nourished during your treatment. We recommend eating 20–30 minutes after having your pain medication.

Generally, the pain medication that you will start on is paracetamol. As your symptoms and pain increase the team can increase the pain relief that you have. This may include taking co-codamol, oramorph or a fentanyl patch. These pain medications are commonly used to relieve pain during radiotherapy.

Unfortunately, as you are given stronger pain medications you may find that you become constipated during your treatment. It is important to remember to take laxatives daily even if you feel that you do not need to, to prevent constipation. Drinking around 2 litres of water a day will also help prevent constipation.

N.B – all medications started by your oncology team will be provided continuously by them - there should be no need to contact your GP for medications.

Oral (mouth) care

You will be given mouthwashes which should be used regularly during the day during your treatment to keep your mouth as clean as possible. These can act as a local anaesthetic and can help with pain control.

It is important to get into a routine with your medications, mouthwashes and keeping your mouth clean. You may need to clean your mouth several times a day. We recommend that you clear the mucous from your mouth/throat through steaming or using a nebuliser, use your mouthwashes and take your pain medication – you will then be ready to eat.

Communication

It is important to let us know how you are feeling and what your symptoms are during treatment so that we can help you.

There is a radiographer in each of the treatment rooms who can contact a medical staff, the specialist radiographer or your CNS who can prescribe medications if needed. They can direct you to other healthcare professionals that can help you such as a Dietitian or a Speech and Language Therapist also.

Speech and Language Therapist

The Speech and Language Therapy team work closely with the Consultants, Radiographers, Dietitians and Clinical Nurse Specialists. The Speech and Language Therapist (sometimes referred to as SLT) will assess your swallow before, during and after your treatment to make sure that your swallow is as effective and safe as possible.

Problems with swallowing can cause coughing or choking, and if left unmanaged can cause chest infections as food or drink may go down the wrong way into your lungs. Radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy can both cause problems with swallowing. This varies depending on the type of treatment you are having and the location of your cancer. Your Speech and Language Therapist may provide you with techniques, exercises or postures to ensure your swallowing is as safe as possible during your treatment and further on in the future.

If you are having problems with your speech, the Speech and Language Therapists can also support you to communicate in the most effective way. Please advise the team if you feel you need support with your swallow or communication at any point.

Diet advice

It is important that you stay as well-nourished as possible during your treatment. This will help you to recover and heal better once the treatment is finished.

Before and during treatment we advise a high protein diet including foods such as meat, dairy and pulses. You should also choose higher calorie food options, such as full-fat dairy products, as it will be difficult to maintain your weight during treatment. This will help you to recover quicker from the side effects of the treatment.

If you are struggling with your diet before treatment your Dietitian may advise you to start taking nutritional supplements. The Dietitian will write to your GP to prescribe these supplements for you and your GP will continue to supply you with supplements throughout your treatment and for as long as you need them afterwards.

During your radiotherapy you will see a Dietitian who will assess you and discuss your diet. The Dietitian works closely with the Speech and Language Therapy Team and will advise you on ways to maximise your nutritional intake and if you need to change the texture of your food or fluid.

If you already have a feeding tube the Dietitian will advise you on what to put through it and how to use it.

If you are struggling to eat and drink or are unable to swallow, we may recommend that you need an enteral feeding tube which will go down your nose and into your stomach. This will help you get

ENT

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

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