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- 020 3447 3711 (Direct line)
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Publication date: May 2004
Date last reviewed: July 2011
Date next review due: July 2013
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University College London Hospitals 
NHS Foundation Trust

The Radiotherapy Department

Radiotherapy to the chest

Patient Information Series No. 6



Information and advice for patients,
relatives and carers

This information booklet attempts to explain some of the side effects which may gradually appear during your course of radiotherapy. This does not mean that you will definitely get them. The effects of radiotherapy vary from person to person, and depend on the dose of radiotherapy received and the length of treatment. The medical staff will be able to advise you what to expect. This information is designed to help keep any side effects to a minimum.

Possible side effects

Skin changes: there may be possible reddening of the skin in the area being treated, and the area may feel warm to the touch. This is a normal reaction to the radiotherapy. Your skin reaction will be monitored daily by the radiographers who will advise you. Please ask for a “**General skin care advice**” leaflet.

Cough: you may notice an increase in a dry or productive cough, and you may experience flu-like symptoms. This is due to the radiotherapy causing inflammation, but this reaction should subside as you progress through treatment. If the cough is persistent or you have any concerns, talk to the treatment radiographers or nurses who can refer you to the doctor.

Cancer Research UK

Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

National Library for Health

Covers all aspects of health, illness and treatments

Website: www.library.nhs.uk

NHS Direct

Tel: 0845 4647 (available 24 hours)

Website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Patient UK

Comprehensive, free, up-to-date health information

Website: www.patient.co.uk

Health Talk Online

Website: www.healthtalkonline.org

NHS 24

Tel: 08454 242424

Website: nhs24.com

NHS Choices

Website: www.nhs.uk

Mesothelioma Information Line

Tel: 0113 231 1010

E-mail: info@asbestos-action.org.uk

Website: www.asbestos-action.org.uk

Oesophageal Patients Association

Tel: 0121 704 9860 (Mon—Fri, 9am-5pm)

E-mail: opa@ukgateway.net

Website: www.opa.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support

Cancerline: Freephone 0808 808 0000 (Mon-Fri 9am-9pm)

E-mail: cancerline@macmillan.org.uk

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Carers UK

Freephone: 0808 808 7777 (Wed - Thurs 10am-12pm and 2-4pm)

E-mail: info@carersuk.org

Website: www.carersuk.org

CancerHelp UK

Freephone Helpline: 0808 800 4040 (Mon—Fri 9am—5pm)

Website: www.cancerhelp.org.uk

You may also notice blood in any phlegm/sputum that you produce. Please inform the radiographers if you notice this. The bleeding may be related to the disease or to the effects of the radiation, but again, it should resolve.

Chest pain: you may develop pain or aches in the area being treated. This is due to the radiotherapy causing inflammation of the tissues. Some patients may already have pain due to the disease and the radiotherapy may temporarily worsen these symptoms. You may have been prescribed painkillers already by the doctor. If not, and the pain is troubling you, please speak to the radiographers or nurses. They can arrange for the doctor to prescribe medication for you.

Breathlessness: the symptoms of breathlessness will vary depending on the dose of radiotherapy received and the number of treatments. Patients receiving palliative (a short course) radiotherapy may already be experiencing breathlessness before radiotherapy begins. As treatment commences you may find the shortness of breath increasing. This is initially due to the radiotherapy and should resolve within 24-48 hrs. If you experience such symptoms, rest as much as possible and try not to undertake any unnecessary strenuous tasks. If you are using

portable oxygen to aid your breathing, you may find that you will need to increase this until the side effects of the radiotherapy disappear. Symptoms of breathlessness can be distressing and cause anxiety. Contact your specialist nurse if you require help.

Patients receiving radical (a long course) radiotherapy may develop symptoms of breathlessness towards the end of treatment. **More importantly**, there may be a recurrence or the first appearance of breathlessness some weeks after radiotherapy has finished. This is due to a condition called subacute pneumonitis, which is a side effect of the radiotherapy, and there may be an increase in a dry cough and fever. This should get better on its own within a few weeks. Some patients, however, may require a short course of steroid tablets. If you are worried, or if the side effects continue for longer, please contact your Consultant, specialist nurse or GP.

Eating and swallowing: during your radiotherapy treatment you are advised to maintain a healthy well balanced diet, as much as possible. However, while having treatment you may experience a loss of appetite, indigestion/heartburn and difficulty in swallowing. These are all common side effects of radiotherapy. If you do not feel like eating, try small regular snacks and

Useful Contacts

Local:

Macmillan Information and Support Radiographer:

Mark Williams

Direct: 020 3447 3711

Main switchboard: 0845 155 5000 ext 73711 / bleep 1458

Alternative switchboard: 020 3456 7890 ext 73711 / bleep 1458

Email: mark.williams@uclh.nhs.uk

National:

Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation

Freephone: 0800 358 7200 (Mon—Fri, 9am-5pm)

E-mail: foundation@roycastle.liv.ac.uk

Website: www.roycastle.org

British Lung Foundation

Helpline: 08458 50 50 20

E-mail: enquiries@blf-uk.org

Website: www.lunguk.org

After your radiotherapy has finished

Once your radiotherapy treatment has finished, you will be given a follow-up appointment to see the radiotherapy doctors in 4 weeks time. This will either be at University College London Hospital or your referring hospital.

The side effects you will have experienced will continue after radiotherapy treatment has finished. It is common to experience a worsening of the skin reactions for about 10-14 days after radiotherapy. Please feel free to contact the department, your specialist nurse, the nursing staff or the Macmillan information and support radiographer if you are worried. You could also contact your GP or call the outpatients to request an earlier follow-up appointment. However, most of the side effects should resolve after you have finished treatment. Before you complete your course of treatment please ask for the leaflet “**Finishing treatment**”.

supplement these meals with high calorie drinks, which can either be bought from the chemist, given by the dietician or prescribed by the doctor/GP. The radiographers will also give you advice on nutrition or refer you to the dietician who can offer advice on maintaining a nourishing and pleasant diet. Eat slowly and drink plenty of fluids to aid digestion. If you are experiencing indigestion/heartburn try to avoid very hot or very cold food and drinks. Eat food that is easy to chew and swallow. Try not to eat rich, spicy foods and avoid neat alcoholic spirit drinks. If you are experiencing any discomfort when eating, please inform the radiographers or nurses. They can provide appropriate advice or refer you to the doctor for medication to relieve any discomfort.

Other Reactions

Feeling sick (nausea): you may feel sick, particularly if the treatment area is near the stomach, and sometimes be sick. Please inform the radiographers if this happens. The doctor can prescribe anti-sickness tablets to help alleviate any symptoms. If you are feeling nauseous you may not feel like eating, so you can be referred to the dietician who can offer advice, or ask for a “**Coping with nausea**” leaflet.

Hair loss: there may be a temporary loss of chest hair (in male patients) in the area treated. This is a normal reaction. The hair usually grows back within a few months once the treatment is over. However, sometimes hair loss may be permanent, depending on the dose of radiotherapy given.

Hoarse voice: you may also experience hoarseness (a gruff sounding voice), particularly if the treatment area includes the throat. Again, this is a normal reaction and is caused by the radiotherapy causing inflammation of the vocal cords. If your throat becomes sore please tell the radiographers who will advise you accordingly.

Fatigue: fatigue is a very common side effect of radiotherapy treatment. Towards the end of treatment you may feel more tired than usual. The fatigue may even continue for several weeks after your radiotherapy has finished. Do not worry, this is a normal reaction. It is usually a combination of travelling to and from hospital, the side effects of the treatment, coping with a diagnosis of cancer, and continuing with normal life. We advise that you do as much as you feel you can and to rest when you are feeling weary. Please ask for our leaflet “**Coping with fatigue and tiredness**”.

You are encouraged to maintain a lifestyle that is normal for you. The treatment may make you feel more fatigued and tired than usual. This tiredness usually occurs towards the end of treatment and is a normal reaction. You are advised to drink plenty of fluids, (ie. water, juice), about 8 glasses per day, and to rest whenever the need arises.

Support

This booklet deals with the physical aspects of your treatment, but your emotional well-being is just as important. Having treatment can be distressing for some patients. Within the radiotherapy department there will be access and support from the Macmillan information and support radiographer, the radiotherapy nurses and the treatment radiographers. However, if you require further medical or emotional support you can be referred to a variety of health professionals specialising in patients needs.

All the staff are here to make sure your treatment goes as smoothly as possible, and to support you through this difficult period. We will try to help you with any questions or problems you may have.