Head and Neck Area
Radiation Therapy to the Head and Neck Area

Information For Patients Receiving Radiation Therapy to the Head and Neck Area

This leaflet aims to provide information for patients receiving a course of radiation therapy to the head and neck area. Your doctor may have already talked to you about this treatment but please ask if anything is still worrying you, however small you think it is. Each course of treatment is tailored to the individual, so your treatment plan may not be the same as somebody else’s.

Before Treatment:
Before your treatment begins you may have a specially fitted mask made for you. This device helps to keep your head in the correct position and allows marks to be drawn on it. Please see the leaflet on ‘The Mould Room’, which tells you more about this process. When a mask/shell is not used, marks may be drawn on the skin.
During treatment the radiation therapists will leave the room. They will watch you on monitors so if you have any problems just raise your hand. There is also an intercom system which allows you to speak to them should you need to.

Daily Procedure:
You may suffer from loss of appetite. This is because the side effects described can make eating and drinking difficult. Radiation therapy can also affect your taste buds. Food and drink often lose or change their taste and texture, and become unappetising. However, it is important to try to remain well nourished, so try the following suggestions:

- Take frequent drinks during meals.
- Your consultant can prescribe artificial saliva, if you need it.

Other:
- It is important to increase your fluid intake while on treatment. Try to increase your daily intake by at least 3 glasses. Include fluids such as water, milk and juices. Do not include tea, coffee or caffeine drinks.
- You may find it useful to suck on some boiled or fruity sweets. These may help to put a ‘taste in your mouth’. Make sure to clean your mouth and teeth afterwards.
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- Eat small meals at regular intervals
- Try different foods
- Concentrate on the smell of the food rather than the taste.

To help you achieve the best possible nutritional intake you will be referred to a dietician early in the treatment process. They will assess you individually and identify any potential problem areas. They will also provide practical advice and support throughout your course of treatment. When your treatment is finished your appetite will gradually return to normal. This may take several months.

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INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS RECEIVING RADIATION THERAPY

Review Clinics:
- A member of your consultant’s medical team will see you routinely once a week. However we can arrange for you to see a doctor at any stage during your treatment should you need to.
- You will also have a blood test twice during your course of treatment. This will be done once at the beginning and again at the end of your course of treatment.

Side Effects:
The radiation therapy process is painless. However there are some side effects associated with radiation therapy. You may notice one or more of them developing over the course of your treatment. Please note that it is rare for one patient to experience all these side effects.

Skin Reaction
A skin reaction may occur in the treated area. This will begin as a mild reddening / darkening of the skin. It may also become a little sore. By the end of the treatment the skin in the treated area will probably be dry, irritated and thickened. Acneous cream should be applied twice daily from the beginning of treatment. The radiation therapists will monitor your skin during your course of treatment. A stronger cream can be given to you if it is needed.

It is important to take extra care of the skin in the treatment area. Certain precautions should be taken:
- You may gently bathe or shower using warm water.
- Wash the treatment area using un-perfumed soap such as baby soap. The radiation therapists will show you where the treatment area covers.

- Do not use any other products on the skin, unless recommended by radiation therapy staff. Some products may irritate the skin, so please ask us before using anything.
- Pat the skin dry with a soft towel. Do not rub it.
- Do not use any make-up in the treatment area.
- Do not wet shave. Use an electric razor only.
- Wear loose comfortable clothing next to the skin, preferably natural fibres such as cotton. If wearing a high collar, please ensure that it is loose and that the top buttons are undone.
- Protect the skin from wind, sun and direct heat. A total sunblock will be needed on the area, once treatment has finished.

- Do not expose skin to hot water bottles, ice packs etc.
- Do not rub or scratch the area, as this will only make the reaction worse.
- Wash clothes that will be in contact with the skin in mild detergent (non-biological washing powder).

Fatigue
Fatigue is another commonly experienced side effect of radiation therapy. It ranges from a mild loss of energy to an overwhelming “bone-tired” feeling that is not always relieved by rest. You may find that you feel more tired as the treatment progresses. These are some ideas that may help:

- Rest as much as you feel that you need to.
- Gentle exercise such as walking 2-3 times a week can help reduce fatigue.
- Do the things that you enjoy and that make you feel good whether it is reading, visiting with friends or spending time outdoors.
- While many people find they are able to carry on working, others may need time off.

You can continue to drive a car if you wish to, many patients are able to drive themselves throughout their treatment.

It may take a while after your treatment finishes before any tiredness you may have been experiencing gradually disappears.

Hair Loss
Hair loss only occurs in the area of the head or neck that is being treated. Therefore you may lose some of your facial hair. Once radiation therapy is complete the hair will usually grow back. However, in certain cases hair loss can be permanent. It is difficult to say when this will occur.

Nausea
Nausea may occur while you are on treatment.
- Enough rest, a balanced diet and a good fluid intake will help to minimise this.
- If eating is painful, gargle a soluble painkiller half an hour before meals. Check with a radiation therapist or nurse to find out which one is suitable for you.

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- Avoid very spicy foods (e.g. chillies and curries). Choose mild foods instead.

- Avoid hard, dry or coarse foods (e.g. crusty bread, crisps, crackers, raw vegetables).

- Try eating soft or liquidised foods (e.g. yoghurts, mashed potato, custard, creamed pudding etc.).

- Allow hot drinks to cool before you drink them.

- Avoid smoking.
- If you are a tobacco smoker, stopping smoking can reduce some of the side effects of treatment.
- Equally importantly, if you stop smoking, you may reduce the risk of a recurrence.

- Your consultant can advise you on where to find help and support if you do smoke and would like to give up.
- There is a smoking cessation officer available in the hospital to give you advice and support to help you quit smoking.
- Avoid alcohol, especially spirits and wines.
- Reducing alcohol intake will help reduce the severity of your treatment side effects.

Mucositis, “ulcers” or thrush may occur as a result. If your throat is being treated, you may also become hoarse. It is important to take extra care of your mouth, teeth and rest your voice to reduce these side effects. You are advised to take the following precautions:

- Regularly rinse and gargle with mouthwash prescribed by the doctor, after meals and at bedtime. One teaspoon of salt/hot/baking soda dissolved in one litre of lukewarm water also makes a good mouthwash. Some brands available in the chemist may be too strong.
- Gently brush your teeth with a soft (children’s) toothbrush after meals. By rinsing the toothbrush in hot water before brushing, you can make it softer.
- Choose fluoride toothpaste without flavourings as they can irritate the mouth.
- Try to leave dentures out as long as you can during the day to prevent them chaffing your gums. Leave them soaking in a denture cleaning solution at night.
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