

Radiotherapy to the pelvis

(bladder, prostate, rectum)



The name of your consultant is:

.....

The radiographer who explained the treatment to you is:

.....

You can contact us on:

Tel: 01872 258340 – 9am to 5pm

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy treats cancer by using high energy X-rays. These X-rays destroy cancer cells while doing as little harm as possible to normal cells. Radiotherapy is often given following surgery to reduce the risk of the cancer coming back, or it may be given instead of surgery if the cancer is inoperable. It may also be given before or after chemotherapy.

Radiotherapy is completely painless and treatment takes between 10–20 minutes.

How often will I need treatment?

Radiotherapy is usually given as a course of treatment. It is usually given from Monday to Friday for several weeks, with a break at weekends. Your radiotherapy consultant (clinical oncologist) will decide how many treatments you need.

What is a planning scan?

Before you begin radiotherapy we need to plan your treatment carefully to ensure you receive maximum benefit. This will involve having a CT scan. This scan will be done in the oncology department and usually takes about 10 minutes.

Some pen marks will be placed on your skin and you will need at least one small permanent skin mark, to enable the radiographers to treat you accurately each day. This will only be done with your permission but is very important. The radiographers will tell you if you need to keep any of the pen marks on your skin, otherwise they may be washed off gently.

If you are having your prostate treated you will be asked to drink 350ml of water, then wait 30 minutes before you are scanned. It is also important that your bowels are empty, therefore we will give you a microenema to use, and if they're not, we may need to give you laxatives. The reason for this is explained in a separate leaflet.

What happens on my first day of treatment?

1. One of the radiographers will collect you from the waiting room and explain exactly the treatment to be given.
2. If you have been asked to have a full bladder you may have an ultrasound scan to check it is full enough.
3. In the treatment room you will be asked to lie in the same position as you were in the scanner.
4. You will be asked to pull your clothes down to expose your pelvis and allow the radiographers to see the tattoo marks. As soon as you have been positioned correctly the radiographers will cover you with a paper sheet.
5. The radiographers leave the room before the treatment begins but are watching you throughout on a TV monitor. They can also hear you and can talk to you if you wish.

Each treatment session lasts about 10 minutes and during this time you will not feel any pain or other sensations.

A short CT scan (CBCT) will be taken on the treatment machine for the first 4 days of your treatment, then weekly or more often to check positioning and your bladder and bowel status. It may be necessary to do a scan daily before treatment to check your bowel and bladder status.

You will have the option to see a Review Radiographer each week to discuss any side effects you may be experiencing.

What side effects can I expect?

Short term effects

These are likely to occur during and immediately after radiotherapy and usually settle quickly.

- **Diarrhoea** – radiotherapy to the pelvis may irritate your bowel and cause diarrhoea and soreness around the anus. If you experience this it is a good idea to increase the amount of fluid you drink to prevent becoming dehydrated. Medicine can also be prescribed by one of the doctors in the department to help with this. Continue with your normal diet, though you may wish to reduce the amount of raw fruit and vegetables you eat.
- **Cystitis** – radiotherapy may cause mild cystitis, which can make you want to pass urine more often, including at night, or cause a burning sensation when you pass water. Drinking plenty of fluid will help to make this less uncomfortable. Some people find drinking cranberry juice or barley water helpful and it may be worth cutting down on tea, coffee, alcohol and acidic fruit juices as these can also irritate the bladder. You may need a urine test to check if you have an infection. An infection can make these feelings worse, but is easily treated with antibiotics.
- **Tiredness** – radiotherapy often makes people feel tired so try to get as much rest as you can, especially if you have a long way to travel for treatment each day. This will gradually disappear in the weeks following your treatment, but can take some time.
- **Skin reaction** – the skin in the treatment area may become pink, dry and itchy, similar to mild sunburn. This may be a particular problem around your anus and in the creases of your groin. Take care of your skin by washing using only a mild, unscented soap, not having the water too hot, not soaking too long in water and patting the area dry gently using a soft towel. Showering is preferable to bathing. If your skin does become sore, bathing with salted water (saline) may help. Do not apply any creams or lotions unless supplied by the radiographers or your oncologist. The radiographers will monitor your skin carefully and advise you as necessary.
- **Nausea** – this is rarely experienced with this treatment. If you do experience nausea it can be settled easily with anti-sickness drugs (anti-emetics), and will settle quickly once the radiotherapy has finished.

- **Sexual dysfunction (men)** – radiotherapy to the pelvis can make it difficult to achieve an erection. This is caused by damage to the lining of blood vessels and nerves in and close to the penis. This may be helped by the use of medication such as Viagra, which your GP or oncologist can discuss with you.
- **Painful intercourse (women)** – following radiotherapy you may find sex difficult or painful. This is caused by narrowing of the vagina. Vaginal dilators can be used to help keep the vagina supple, although regular intercourse is the most natural way to achieve this. Your vagina may also feel dry and this can be helped by using lubrication gels such as Replens or hormone creams if appropriate.

What are vaginal dilators?

Dilators are plastic and are shaped to resemble a penis. The dilator needs to be inserted gently into your vagina to stretch it gradually and help prevent narrowing. A review radiographer will give you a set of dilators at the end of your treatment and explain how to use them. You are advised not to use them until six weeks after your radiotherapy has finished as your vagina may feel sore after the treatment.

Are there any long term side effects?

Radiotherapy can lead to side effects that occur months or years after treatment has finished.

- **Increased bowel motion or diarrhoea** – caused by irritation of the bowel lining.
- **Rectal pain and bleeding** – this is also caused by irritation of the lining of the rectum.
- **Blood in stools or urine** – this may happen as blood vessels become more fragile following radiotherapy.
- **Strictures** – this is a narrowing of the bowels which may lead to blockage, obstruction or fistula (hole).
- **Bladder shrinkage** – fibrosis of the bladder muscle may occur, which causes urinary frequency.
- **Lymphodema** – this is swelling of the legs, which can be caused by the effects of radiotherapy on the lymph glands in the groin.

- **Painful intercourse/impotence** – as in short term effects.
- **Induced malignancy** – there is a small risk that the radiotherapy you receive may cause a second unrelated cancer within the pelvis.

General advice

Everyone having radiotherapy is different. Your treatment is specific to you and so is the way you react to treatment. If you are worried about anything at all, however trivial it may seem, please speak to the radiographers, as we may be able to help.

Data Protection

All personal images and photographs taken during the planning and delivery of radiotherapy will be used in accordance with this Trust's policy on the protection and use of patient information.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

