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Radiotherapy to the brain

Radiotherapy

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This information is for patients who are going to receive radiotherapy to their brain.

This leaflet will explain:

- What is radiotherapy?
- What to expect on your first visit
- Types of masks we make
- The planning stage
- The treatment stage
- General information about side effects of treatment
 - During and after treatment
 - Long-term side effects
- Completion of radiotherapy and follow-up
- Who to contact when you need advice

You might find it helpful to read The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre 'Radiotherapy' booklet, which explains how radiotherapy works and what to expect when you attend the department.

What is radiotherapy

Radiotherapy is a treatment that involves the use of high-energy radiation. It is commonly used to treat cancer. It can be used alone, with or without surgery or in combination with chemotherapy. The appropriate treatment will be discussed with you by your cancer doctor.

What to expect on your first visit

On your first visit, you will attend the 'Mould Room' at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral. This is where all immobilisation equipment (accessories to help keep you still during treatment) is made. A member of staff will be able to talk to you to discuss the most appropriate immobilisation mask for your specific treatment.

We may also record your height and weight and send you for some blood tests at this appointment.

Types of masks we make

We make two different types of mask for radiotherapy treatment, your cancer doctor and the mould room staff will decide which one is more suitable for you.

Clear plastic mask:

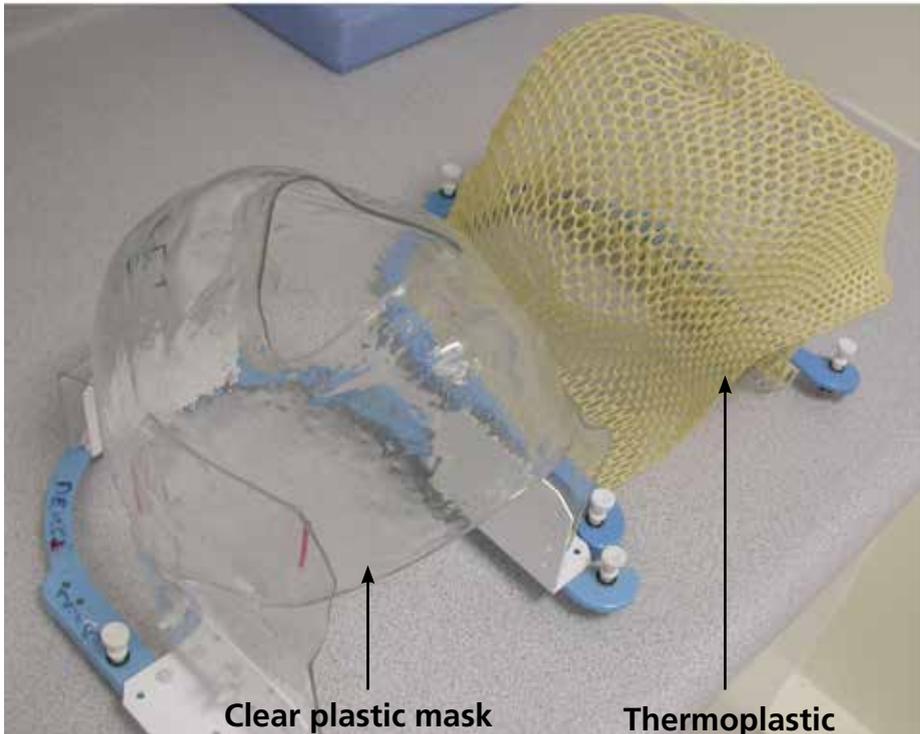
This mask is made by putting a small amount of vaseline on your face and placing cling film over your hair and any areas of facial hair. The next stage is to apply wet plaster of Paris bandages (similar to those used to mend broken bones) onto your face and head to get a perfect impression of you. Your nose and/or mouth will not be covered throughout this process. The bandages get warm as they dry (approximately 5 minutes). Once set, the mask will be removed, we will clean you up and then you will be free to leave. The whole process takes approximately 20 minutes.

You will need to return a few days later to have your plastic mask fitted and ready for the planning stage.



Thermoplastic:

This mask starts as a flat sheet of perforated plastic attached to a frame. It is placed in a hot water bath where it becomes soft and flexible. It is then placed over your face and head and feels like a warm, wet flannel. We mould the plastic sheet to get a perfect impression of you, which can feel a little strange, but is painless. The mask sets in approximately five minutes and is ready to use straight away. As the mask is perforated, it allows normal breathing.



The planning stage

As part of the planning process for your radiotherapy treatment, you will require a Computerised Tomography (CT) scan and possibly a



Magnetic Resonance scan (MRI). The CT scan only takes a few minutes and provides us with a picture of your internal anatomy. If you require an MRI scan, these take longer, approx. 30 minutes but full details, including time, will be discussed with you by the mould room staff. To help us see the area that we need to treat, you may need an injection of contrast (dye). We will discuss this in more detail with you when you arrive for your planning appointment.

The treatment stage

Radiographers operate the radiotherapy machines to give you the precise treatment prescribed by your cancer doctor. They will explain to you what is going to happen and take you into the treatment room. You will be asked to remove any clothing and jewellery that cover the area being treated. The radiographers will help you onto the treatment bed, position your mask and adjust



both the bed and the machine to the exact positions that are required. You will also be asked to keep as still as possible.

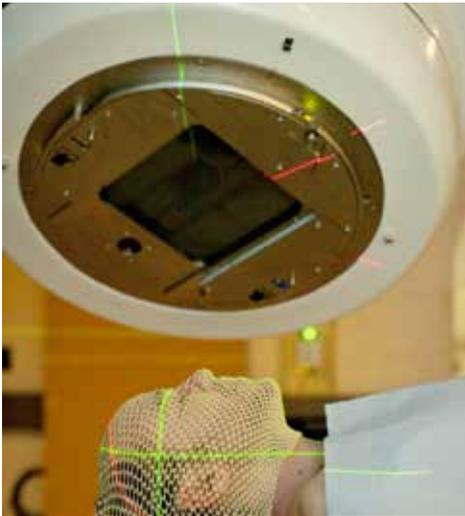
The radiotherapy machines are quite big and if you have never seen them before you might feel anxious. There is no need to worry - you won't see or feel anything during treatment.

Once you have been positioned for your treatment, the radiographers will leave the room and operate the machine

from outside the room.

The treatment machine will rotate to different positions during your treatment, you will be required to lie still and breathe normally throughout. Each daily treatment session will take about 15 minutes in total. This includes time for you to change, for the radiographers to help position you for treatment and for the actual delivery of the treatment.

During your treatment you will be alone in the room, but the radiographers will be watching you carefully on a closed circuit television system.



This picture shows how you will be positioned each day ready for treatment. The green lines you can see are called levelling lasers and help the radiographers set the treatment machine to target the same area every day.

General information about side effects of treatment

Radiotherapy can cause general side effects such as tiredness, but there are some effects which are specific to having radiotherapy to the brain. Side effects depend on the number of treatments you have. Every patient is different and you may not have the same side effects as somebody else. While you are having radiotherapy, it is very important that you continue to take the medication prescribed by your cancer doctor. Do not change anything unless you have discussed it with your cancer doctor first.

Most side effects are temporary but some may last for weeks or months after your treatment has finished.

During your treatment, a radiographer or nurse will be able to answer any questions and deal with most of your problems. However, your cancer doctor will also see you regularly throughout your treatment. It is important to let us know about your side effects.

Occasionally, it may be necessary to come into hospital to help you cope with your side effects during treatment.

Side effects during and after your treatment

Headaches

Headaches are a very common side effect of radiotherapy to the brain. These may be due to increased swelling as a result of the treatment. You may be prescribed a steroid drug called



Dexamethasone for this. Always remember to carry your steroid card which has instructions about taking Dexamethasone. You can also take painkillers to help you, such as paracetamol. It is important that you tell the radiographers who are treating you if you are having headaches.

Nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting (being sick)

Treatment to your brain may make you sick or feel sick. If it is going to happen, it usually occurs two to six hours after your treatment and usually settles within a couple of hours. If you have not felt sick with your first or second treatments, you are unlikely to be affected by the remaining treatments.

If you do feel sick, let the radiographer or nurse know so that they can advise you of any self-help solutions or give you the necessary medicine.

You can help yourself by:

- Trying to drink plenty of non-alcoholic drinks, especially if you do not feel like eating
- Trying to eat small meals four or five times a day, rather than the usual three meals a day
- If possible, having your meals prepared for you

If you are taking steroids, this can reduce the likelihood of nausea.

Your skin (scalp)

Your skin may become red and itchy. The reaction is similar to mild sunburn. Any soreness should quickly heal when your treatment has finished. If your skin becomes uncomfortable, ask the radiographer or nurse for advice.

You can help yourself by:

- Washing your hair very gently using a baby shampoo and avoiding washing your hair if your scalp becomes sore – avoid very hot water
- Gently drying with a soft towel, avoid using a hot hairdryer
- Not exposing the treated area to bright sunlight either during or for several months after your treatment has finished – wearing a hat is advisable
- Avoid using hair products throughout your treatment and afterwards until your skin has healed

Your hair

Any hair included in the treatment area may gradually fall out. Whether or not you lose your hair depends very much on the dose of radiation and the number of treatments you are going to have. Your cancer doctor will discuss this with you.

Hair loss is usually temporary and it will usually start to grow again three to six months after finishing your treatment.

However, for some patients the hair loss will be permanent. If necessary, the radiographers or nurses will arrange for you to see someone about obtaining a wig. Turbans, scarves, caps and hats are alternatives to wearing a wig.

If you require a wig, then ask the treatment radiographer and they will be able to give you advice on who to contact. It is a good idea



to get your wig before you lose a lot of hair, so that you can match it with your natural colour.

Tiredness

It is common to feel more tired than usual during your treatment and for several weeks after your treatment has finished. It is important to rest when you feel the need to do so and ask your family and friends to help when they can. Gradually, you will get back to normal activities.

If you develop any of the following symptoms, please let your cancer doctor, radiographer or nurse know, or contact your GP:

- Severe headaches
- Changes in your eyesight
- Fits or seizures
- Vomiting
- Weakness in limbs or difficulty walking

Possible long-term side effects

It is possible for some side effects to occur months or years after the treatment has finished. Some patients may notice short-term memory loss and other late effects will depend on the part of the brain treated. Your cancer doctor will discuss any possible late effects with you.

Completion of radiotherapy and follow-up

You will receive a follow-up appointment to see your cancer doctor at a clinic close to your home, usually 4-6 weeks after treatment has finished. This appointment will be given to you by the treatment radiographers at the end of your treatment. At this appointment, the cancer doctor will discuss how you have been since your treatment and will often arrange for you to have a follow-up scan. If you are worried about anything you feel may be related to the tumour or the treatment, please contact us and, if necessary, we can arrange an earlier follow-up appointment for you.

It can take many months before you feel you have recovered from the treatment side effects. If you are feeling low or experience mood swings, it may be useful to speak to your GP or cancer doctor. Some patients find it useful to have the support of others who have experience of cancer by attending local support groups. Contact your local Macmillan Information & Support Centre for more details.

IMPORTANT

DO NOT stop taking your **steroids** until your cancer doctor or GP advises you to do so. It is important that steroids are not stopped quickly and that they are gradually reduced.



Driving

All drivers who have a brain tumour must contact the DVLA and inform them of their diagnosis. The website link will give you information on whether your type of brain tumour prevents you from driving.

The DVLA can be contacted at: DVLA, Swansea SA6 7JL.

You can also notify the DVLA of your medical condition by telephone: 0300 790 6806

Full details and advice are also available on the website at:
<https://www.gov.uk/health-conditions-and-driving>

Prescriptions

From 1 April 2009 NHS patients treated for cancer became entitled to free prescriptions. Prescriptions from The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre PharmaC are free for NHS patients. You will need an exemption certificate to get free prescriptions from a community pharmacy. Application forms are available from your GP and the Macmillan Information and Support Centre at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral or Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree.

Contact details

The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre NHS Foundation Trust

www.clatterbridgecc.nhs.uk

telephone: 0151 556 5000

To contact The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre specialist neurological nurse, please ring **0151 556 5850**

To contact the Mould Room, please ring **0151 556 5095**

To contact your treatment machine, please see your treatment appointment list for details.

Macmillan Cancer Support

Macmillan booklets about coping and living with cancer and treatment side effects are available free of charge. These can be ordered by telephoning 0808 808 00 00 or by visiting a Macmillan Information Centre (sited in the main entrances of Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral and Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree).

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk telephone 0808 808 0000

Macmillan Cancer Information and Support at:

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral 0151 556 5570

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree 0151 556 5959



Additional Information

You may find the following The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre patient information leaflet useful:

- Eating well and coping with side effects

The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre Hotline 0800 169 5555

If you are unwell during or up to 8 weeks following your cancer treatment please call The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre Hotline.

Your call will be answered by a dedicated nurse advisor. This line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

How we produce our information

All of our leaflets are produced by staff at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre and this information is not sponsored or influenced in any way. Every effort is made to ensure that the information included in this leaflet is accurate and complete and we hope that it will add to any professional advice you have had. All our leaflets are evidence based where appropriate and they are regularly reviewed and updated. If you are concerned about your health in any way, you should consult your healthcare team.

We rely on a number of sources to gather evidence for our information. All of our information is in line with accepted national or international guidelines where possible. Where no guidelines exist, we rely on other reliable sources such as systematic reviews, published clinical trials data or a consensus review of experts. We also use medical textbooks, journals and government publications.

References for this leaflet can be obtained by telephoning 0151 556 5570.

If you need this leaflet in large print, Braille, audio or different language, please call 0151 556 5570.

If you have a comment, concern, compliment or complaint, please call 0151 556 5203.

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