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Whole brain radiotherapy (WBRT) to secondary brain tumours

Radiotherapy

A guide for patients and carers

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If you have any general enquiries prior to starting your treatment, please contact the Information & Support Radiographer, Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral, Monday to Friday during office hours (9am-5pm) on **0151 556 5314**.

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.



This information is for patients who are going to receive radiotherapy to their brain for the treatment of secondary brain tumours when the whole brain is treated. It will explain what to expect when you attend for planning and treatment and details the services that are available to you at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre.



A photograph of a treatment unit

Radiotherapy is given when cancer cells from another part of the body (known as the primary) have spread to and developed (known as metastases) in the brain. The aim of the radiotherapy is to help relieve any symptoms or prevent symptoms from developing and to slow down the growth of the cancer.

Rarely, the diagnosis of cancer is made following the detection of brain metastases.

Radiotherapy is usually given in 5 or 10 treatment sessions over a 1-2 week period.

What to expect when you attend

The first appointment is at the pre-treatment department at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral hospital where, ideally, we make a device called a cast (or mould), then we will do a CT scan of your head. We will mark the cast with reference marks in preparation for treatment. Planning takes about 20-30 minutes.

The making of the cast, planning and treatment occurs while you are lying down and awake

Each cast is individually made to ensure it fits well and is comfortable. Its purpose is to help you to stay still and to place the treatment marks onto it, rather than your skin. The cast made at planning is used again for each treatment.

The cast starts as a flat sheet of plastic attached to a frame. It is first placed in a warm water bath where the plastic sheet becomes





soft and flexible. Then it is placed over and onto your face and head; it feels like a warm, wet flannel. Using our fingers and gentle pressure, we mould the plastic sheet to your shape, which can feel a little strange, but is painless. The plastic cools and sets in approximately 5 minutes and is ready to use straight away. Usually, the planning procedure follows immediately after the making of the cast.

Following an assessment of your needs and the technical details of the treatment, we will confirm the date you will start your radiotherapy. The majority of people will start radiotherapy a few days later and we will give you a printed list of your appointments.

Those starting the same day should expect to be at the hospital for a few hours, so please bring your medication with you. We have pagers that you can use while you wait which allow you to go to other areas, e.g. coffee shops or outside. You should eat and drink normally before you attend and while you are waiting. If you live locally and have brought yourself, (rather than using hospital

transport) for the appointment, you can choose to go home and return later in the day if you wish.

If preferred, some people may be able to have their treatment in our radiotherapy department in Liverpool.

The treatment procedure is similar to planning and takes about 10 minutes with treatment delivery taking only a few minutes. It is painless and you should breathe normally throughout.

Support Services

- We have Clinical Nurse Specialist staff available to give additional information, advice and support to patients (and carers), if required
- If you have secondary brain cancer, you may be entitled to certain disability benefits, e.g. Personal Independence Payment if you are under 65 or Attendance Allowance if you are over 65. We have a Macmillan Welfare Benefits Service at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre who can give advice regarding entitlement to ensure that you do not miss out on financial support. Please ask a healthcare professional looking after you to make the referral on your behalf. There are other sources of benefits advice, e.g. Macmillan Cancer Support Benefit telephone helpline (0808 808 00 00), your local Citizens Advice Bureau, local council advice service or other advice agency. It is important to apply for benefits as soon as possible, as entitlement usually only starts from the date of claim



General information about the side effects of radiotherapy treatment

The usual pattern for the development of the temporary (acute) side effects is to gradually start 5-10 days after the first treatment. They usually persist and worsen, the effects being most troublesome about 10 days after the last radiotherapy treatment. After this, the healing process begins. The side effects usually settle over the following 2-3 weeks. You will be reviewed during treatment and given medicines and advice to help you cope.

Possible side effects

Tiredness

This is an expected side effect of radiotherapy treatment, especially if you have a long distance to travel. Receiving radiotherapy to the brain can be particularly tiring. Tiredness may persist for a number of weeks, but usually it slowly improves. To help you to cope, do only the things that are necessary and plan rest breaks into your routine.

Sickness and Headache

Some people will develop these symptoms as a result of their treatment, which can cause slight temporary swelling of the brain tissues. Your doctor may prescribe some medication (steroids) to prevent this. If you develop these symptoms during treatment, please let us know as soon as possible.

Drowsiness (somnolence)

This may occur after the treatment has ended. It is usually mild. This period of tiredness sometimes gets worse around 4-6 weeks after treatment and will then gradually improve.

Skin reaction, hair loss and wigs

The areas of skin within the treatment field may become inflamed (sore) as a result of treatment, with the area around the ears, the back of the neck and forehead being most troublesome. The skin reaction is likely to start about 10 days after the first treatment, with the peak of any discomfort about 10 days after it is completed. You can help yourself by:

- Washing your hair/scalp very gently using a baby shampoo
- Use warm/cool water
- Gently drying with a soft towel, and take care to avoid the scalp when using a hair drier
- Protecting your head/scalp from the weather; both to cold wind and to bright sunlight during and for several months after your treatment has finished – wearing a hat is advisable
- Using any creams we give you and avoid using other hair products throughout your treatment and afterwards until your skin soreness has settled



With WBRT, the whole scalp is treated resulting in temporary hair loss. Hair loss usually starts 2 weeks or so after starting radiotherapy. It usually starts to grow again three to six months after finishing your treatment, but may be thinner.

For the vast majority of people, it is possible to place the treatment fields in such a way to avoid treating the eyebrows.

Some people choose to wear a wig. Please visit the Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centres in the main entrances of Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral and Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree for more information.

Memory loss

It is recognised that some people who have WBRT may notice their memory isn't as good as it was. There are a number of factors which can contribute to this and it varies from person to person. If it is troublesome, referral to an occupational therapist can help you find ways to help cope, e.g. by using memory aids.

Important information for drivers

All drivers who develop secondary brain cancer must stop driving and contact the DVLA to inform them of their diagnosis.

The DVLA can be contacted by post Drivers' Medical Enquiries, DVLA, Swansea, SA99 1TU or phone 0300 790 6806. Full details and advice are also available on the website at: <https://www.gov.uk/driving-medical-conditions/telling-dvla-about-a-medical-condition-or-disability>.

Follow-up

Most people will be seen in the Oncology clinic a few weeks after finishing their radiotherapy. This appointment is likely to be at your local hospital.

Alternatively, if you have contact with other teams for ongoing supportive care, e.g. District Nurse/Macmillan team staff that visit you at home, consider contacting them and/or your GP if you have any concerns.

Macmillan booklets about 'Coping and Living with Cancer' and 'Treatment Side Effects' are available free of charge. These can be ordered by telephoning 0800 500 800 or by visiting a Macmillan Information Centre (sited in the main entrances of Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral and Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree).



Contact details

The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre NHS Foundation Trust

www.clatterbridgecc.nhs.uk

0151 556 5000

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk

tel: 0800 808 0000

Macmillan Cancer Information and Support at:

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral 0151 556 5570

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree 0151 556 5959

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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