

Three large, teal-colored arcs of varying radii are positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping each other.

Radiotherapy to the abdomen

A horizontal teal bar with a white border on the right side, containing the word 'Radiotherapy' in white text.

Radiotherapy

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If you have any questions before starting your treatment, please contact the Information and Support Radiographer at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral, Monday to Friday (9am - 5pm) on **0151 556 5314**.



This information is for patients who are going to receive radiotherapy to their abdomen (belly).

This leaflet will explain:

- Why you need radiotherapy
- General information about side effects of treatment
- Who to contact if you need advice

You might find it helpful to read our booklet 'Radiotherapy,' which explains how radiotherapy works and what to expect when you attend.

Why you need radiotherapy

The abdomen holds many organs. The most common examples are cancers of the stomach, pancreas, kidney, lymph glands, liver, gall bladder and spleen.

The treatment of each type of cancer is different, but often involves radiotherapy. It can be given in an attempt to cure or get long-term control of the cancer (called radical treatment). In this case, approximately 3-5 weeks of treatment is usual. Alternatively, it can be used when the disease is more advanced to control symptoms only, e.g. pain (called palliative or short course) when a smaller number of treatments are adequate.

Some types of cancer are treated with radiotherapy and chemotherapy (drugs) at the same time. This is called chemo-radiotherapy. If it is beneficial in the treatment of the type of cancer you have, your oncology doctor will discuss this with you.

General information about side effects of treatment

Every person is different and you may not have the same side effects as somebody else. They depend on the number of treatments you have. With a short course of radiotherapy, the side effects may not happen until after your treatment has finished and are likely to be less troublesome than with a long course. If chemotherapy is part of your treatment, the side effects will also be discussed and you will be offered written information.

Side effects during and immediately after completion of radiotherapy

The usual pattern for the development of the temporary (short term or acute) side effects are as follows:

Most side effects start to show their effects about 10 days after the first treatment. Once started, the side effects 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 quickly over the following 2-3 weeks. Most side effects are temporary, but some may last for weeks or months after your treatment has finished.



It is important to let us know how you are feeling. You will be reviewed during your treatment and given medicines and advice to help you cope. Most people attend as an outpatient. If you find it hard to cope, you may need to be admitted to one of our wards for a short time, though this is rare.

Radiotherapy support practitioner service

This member of staff is available to give additional information, advice and support to patients (and carers) who receive radiotherapy to their abdomen. If you would like more information, please talk to your radiographer or nurse.

Side effects

Feeling sickly (nausea) and vomiting (being sick)

These effects happen due to irritation of the bowel, stomach and other digestive organs, so it is likely that you will feel sickly (nausea). It often happens 2-6 hours following treatment and usually settles within a couple of hours. Often, your doctor will give you anti-sickness tablets (anti-emetics); taken either throughout the day or a short time before each treatment.

You can help yourself by:

- Taking (or asking for) anti-sickness medication
- Avoiding unnecessary activities, e.g. visits/travel if you are feeling sickly
- Trying to drink, especially if you do not feel like eating. Avoid fizzy drinks and drinking before or during meals

- Trying to eat small meals four or five times a day
- Learning the best time for you to eat, e.g. in the morning if you have treatment in the afternoon
- Having your meals prepared for you, if possible, or for a short time use frozen prepared meals that need very little effort to cook
- Sit up for, and shortly after, your meals

Vomiting may happen with or without nausea. It is important to treat nausea and vomiting as it can affect your eating, so please tell your radiographer if you experience either symptom. We will monitor your weight and will refer you to our dieticians, if necessary. We have a leaflet called 'Eating well & coping with side effects'. If you have not been offered a copy, ask for one if you think it may be helpful.

Your bowels

The treatment may irritate your bowel, causing side effects that include:

- Getting cramp-type pain in your abdomen (belly)
- Feeling bloated
- Opening your bowels more often and passing watery bowel motions (diarrhoea)



You can help yourself by:

- Telling us if your bowel habits are changing
- Avoiding eating foods that you know upset your bowel
- Avoiding fizzy drinks or foods that make you pass wind
- Continuing to follow any advice and/or medication you have already been given to help you manage your bowels

Bowel obstruction

A rare complication is bowel obstruction. Bowel obstruction is defined as "the partial or complete narrowing of the bowel". Radiotherapy can cause an obstruction as a result of inflammation (soreness) of the bowel. The risk of developing an obstruction is present while you are receiving radiotherapy, and for a few weeks after completion of treatment, until the side effects affecting the bowel have settled.

The signs of bowel obstruction are as follows, and occur at the same time: nausea and vomiting (feeling and being sick), constipation (lack, or reduced number, of bowel movements) and severe pain in the abdomen.

In the event that you develop these symptoms, you should urgently contact the Clatterbridge Centre Hotline 0800 169 5555. Your call will be answered by a dedicated nurse advisor. This line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Tiredness

It is quite common to feel more tired than usual for several weeks after your treatment has finished. It is important to rest when you feel the need to do so. Ask your family and friends to help when they can. If you live alone, do only the things that are necessary until you feel stronger. Gradually, you will get back to normal activities.

Your skin

Your skin may become red, dry and itchy. The reaction is similar to mild sunburn. If your skin becomes uncomfortable, ask the radiographer or nurse for advice.

You can help yourself by:

- Washing the area very gently in lukewarm water with a mild, unperfumed soap, e.g. baby soap. A shower is ideal, patting the area dry with a soft towel. Do not rub
- Not exposing the treated area to any sunlight either during, or for a few months after, your treatment has finished
- Only applying creams recommended by your radiographer, nurse or doctor

Risk of late and permanent effects

There are a number of structures in the abdomen that are sensitive to radiation. These include the kidney, small bowel, liver and spinal cord. The risk of damage depends upon:



- The total radiation dose (the higher the total dose, the greater the risk of permanent damage)
- The actual dose to any individual organ. This is dependent on the site of the disease and the design of the treatment. One of the aims of the planning process is to ensure that the dose to these organs is known and within a safe limit

The risks will be discussed with you by your oncology doctor and need to be balanced against your current health needs. Discuss any concerns with your oncology doctor.

The effects of permanent damage to the:

- **Kidney** - its' function can be reduced. Rarely, kidney failure can occur
- **Small bowel** - causing long term changes in your bowel habits, usually needing to go the toilet more often and looser motions. Often, changes to your diet can help and referral to a dietician can be arranged
- **Liver** - its' function can be affected. Inflammation, pain and jaundice (which can cause the skin to become yellow) can occur. Rarely, liver failure can occur
- **Spinal cord** - problems emptying your bowels and/or bladder and some, or complete, loss of coordination, strength and feeling in your legs

You will have been given a copy of your radiotherapy consent form. It has the details on the risks for you.

These effects are rare and can start months or years after treatment. If you notice any of the above, discuss them with your oncology doctor. Your GP can arrange, or bring forward, an appointment with them.

Follow-up

As you complete your radiotherapy, your care needs will be assessed. If you develop any new nursing needs as a result of radiotherapy, we can make arrangements for a district nurse to visit you.

In the first few weeks after finishing treatment, your condition is likely to worsen - this is usual. If you are finding it hard to cope (especially with eating and drinking) and you need help, contact your GP, district nurse or staff at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre.

You will be seen by your oncology doctor a few weeks after finishing your radiotherapy. This appointment will be at your local hospital. After that, you will be seen at regular intervals but if you have any concerns that you think may be related to your cancer, you should not wait for that appointment. Talk to your GP and you can be seen earlier, if required.

If you have been affected by tiredness and fatigue, it may persist. Planning ahead, doing only the things that are necessary and having plenty of rest breaks in your routine helps. Ensure you eat as well as you can. Slowly, it should improve, but it can take a number of weeks to recover.



You and/or your carers may find it useful to talk to others who have been treated for cancer by joining a support group. Contact the local Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centre for more details.

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 0000 or by visiting a Macmillan Information Centre (located in the main entrance at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral and Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree).

Contact details

The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre

www.clatterbridgecc.nhs.uk or telephone 0151 556 5000

Radiotherapy Support Practitioner: 0151 556 5152

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk or telephone 0808 808 0000

Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centre at:

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral 0151 556 5570

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree 0151 556 5959

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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