



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

### Side Effects , Soreness Continued :

- + Equally importantly, smoking can reduce the risk of a recurrence.
- + Your consultant can advise you on where to find help and support if you currently have a high alcohol intake and would like to give up.

Please tell the radiation therapists or doctor if you notice ulcers or white spots (thrush) inside your mouth, feel discomfort, pain or have difficulty swallowing.

### Dry Mouth/Throat

You may have a dry mouth and throat during the course of treatment and for several months afterwards. This is because of the sensitive nature of the salivary glands. It is important to note that this side effect may be long-term. The consistency of your saliva may also change, making it thick and difficult to swallow.

The following suggestions can help you deal with this:

- + Follow the oral care as already described. As you will have less saliva, your teeth are at a higher risk of decay. Therefore, it is very important to keep your mouth clean and fresh.
- + Carry a bottle of water with you to keep the mouth moist and use it frequently. You may find it easier to sip with a straw.
- + 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.
- + Take frequent drinks during meals.
- + Your consultant can prescribe artificial saliva, if you need it.

### Loss of Appetite

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 and remain well nourished, so try the following suggestions:

- + Eat small meals at regular intervals
- + Try out 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.

### 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.

It can be difficult to get through a long course of treatment without feeling low at some point. It is quite normal to feel 'up and down' during radiation therapy and for several weeks afterwards. Please let us know when things get tough and we will do our best to help you.

### After Treatment:

Radiation therapy is a cumulative treatment. Any reactions that you have had may persist for several weeks after you finish treatment. The reactions are usually most severe in the 1-2 weeks after the treatment finishes. You should continue to follow any advice given until these side effects have subsided.

On your final day of treatment you will be given an appointment to see the doctor in approximately 6-8 weeks. At this appointment the doctor will discuss your progress.

We are here to help. If you would like more information on any aspect of your treatment, or you are troubled by anything, please do not hesitate to ask us.

### Contact Telephone Numbers:

Radiation therapy Reception: 021-4922492

LA 1: 021-4922479

LA 2: 021-4922478

LA 3: 021-4921307

LA 4: 021-4921308



## 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 your treatment. This device helps to keep your head in the correct position and allows marks to be drawn on it. It also helps the radiation therapists to locate the exact treatment area. 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.

### Daily Procedure:

- + The radiation therapists will position you on the treatment couch using the marks drawn on your mask (or skin). It is important to be as relaxed as possible and try not to help them if they are moving you.
- + Once you are correctly positioned try not to move. You can breathe normally.
- + 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.
- + You will not see or feel anything, but you will hear the machine switch on. The machine will move around you but will not touch you.
- + If you feel concerned at any time while the mask is on, try to remain calm and breathe normally. Raise your hand to show that you need us. The radiation therapist will come into the room immediately to sort out the problem.
- + It is essential that you do not move until a radiation therapist has told you that your treatment has finished.

**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 you 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 of 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 reddened. Aqueous 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.
- + Try eating small meals frequently during the day.
- + A simple anti-sickness medication can be prescribed for you if necessary. Please speak to the radiation therapists about this.

**Soreness**

The mouth and throat may become inflamed and sore during the course of treatment. This is because these areas are very sensitive to radiation therapy. As your treatment progresses, slight swelling may occur and chewing and swallowing may become increasingly difficult.

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 affects. You are advised to take the following precautions:

- + Regularly rinse and gargle with mouthwash prescribed by the doctors, after meals and at bedtime. One teaspoon of salt/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.
- + Frequent drinks of water, cordial, etc. or regular sipping can help to keep your mouth and throat moist.
- + 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.
- + 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.