Common questions about radiotherapy treatment

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The following content contains images and descriptions of cancer treatment that some people may find upsetting or triggering. Please follow the guidance of your clinical team for information specific to your situation. Some medical terms may not translate accurately when using translation tools.

What is radiotherapy used for?

Radiotherapy is one of the main three treatments for cancer. It can be used alone, or with other treatments like chemotherapy and surgery. It is more effective for some cancers than for others. If you have cancer, you will have a Multidisciplinary team that will review your case before deciding which treatment or treatments are right for your diagnosis.

Radiotherapy can be used to destroy cancer cells in your body and put cancer into remission. In day-to-day life, the general public and media often use the term ‘cured’ but in some of our work with patients they prefer to use the term ‘no evidence of disease’ because it feels more realistic to them.

You might have cancer that cannot be ‘cured’, but radiotherapy may help you to live better and longer. In some cases, it can control or lessen cancer symptoms, like pain and bleeding.

Radiotherapy can be used to treat tumours that are not cancerous. These are known as non-malignant or benign, even though they can have a serious effect on people.

Tell me more about my Multidisciplinary team meeting

Dr Michael Kosmin explains what a Multidisciplinary Team meeting is and who it involves. Dr Michael Kosmin is talking specifically about Gamma Knife radiotherapy (for brain tumours) in this video, but a lot of the information applies to cancer in any part of the body.

<https://youtu.be/B8Yfz5NPjho>

Is radiotherapy safe?

Yes. Radiotherapy is given by a trained team of highly skilled healthcare professionals including doctors, physicists and therapeutic radiographers. Strict national and international standards must be followed for each treatment. This is closely monitored at every stage of the treatment pathway. Equipment is regularly checked and has to pass strict quality checks often before each treatment, by several team members.

If you have any fears about safety, please speak to your treatment team. Despite being very safe, radiotherapy can and does cause side effects, some of which can happen many years later. The more you understand side effects and late effects, the more prepared you can be.

What are the side effects and late effects of radiotherapy treatment?

This is a huge subject, and each person will have a unique experience. Side effects will depend on:

the part of the body being treated

the patient being treated

the dose given

the type of radiotherapy used

the other treatments patients are having

They can happen early or during radiotherapy or a long time after known as late and long terms side effects.

What causes side effects of radiotherapy treatment?

Side effects happen because healthy tissue is damaged by the radiation. This can cause inflammation in the treatment area as the body defends itself. When targeting cancer cells, it is impossible not to cause some damage to surrounding healthy tissue. Healthcare professionals work hard to make sure this is minimal.

Does radiotherapy treatment hurt?

When the radiotherapy is being delivered the treatment itself is not painful. It is similar to having an X-ray or CT scan taken. Some people can feel pain or discomfort from the side effects of treatment or the often slightly awkward positions they need to lie in for treatment. If you have had surgery or other treatments this might make the experience uncomfortable. Your therapeutic radiographers are there to support you. They will use equipment to make you as stable and comfortable as they can.

Some people find the experience very mentally challenging and experience strong emotions during treatment. Especially if they have to wear a mask or head frame which can feel very claustrophobic. You can talk to your team about any worries you have and they will help as much as possible. You can read stories from people that have been through cancer treatment here.

How long does radiotherapy treatment take?

Treatments usually last between ten minutes and one hour. The length of time depends on the area being treated and the type of treatment. Some treatments are more complicated and take more time to set up and carry out.

Can I miss a treatment?

For external beam radiotherapy, you would typically have weekday treatments. Treatments can range from a single session to daily sessions over a few weeks. Usually you can have the weekend ‘off’ and won’t have a treatment on Saturday and Sunday. To make sure the treatment works as well as possible, it is important that treatments are not delayed or missed unless there is a really good reason. If you must miss a treatment for medical reasons your team will talk this through with you. If you are having a course of radiotherapy, it’s important not to book holidays or make plans that could cause you to miss any treatment.

How will radiotherapy treatment affect my day-to-day life?

Radiotherapy can cause specific side effects within and close to the area treated. It can also cause tiredness, no matter which area of the body is treated. You might want to give yourself more time to do everyday things and not put too much pressure on yourself. Continuing with regular routines and the things that make life feel normal and enjoyable can be really good for your wellbeing. Many patients say that gentle exercise helped them to cope with treatment. You can watch a video about preparing for radiotherapy and things you can do to help here [Jo’s video link]

Can I travel, drive, fly on a plane or go on holiday?

Nobody plans to have cancer. A diagnosis can really disrupt your life. You might have a holiday that clashes with treatment or need to use your car to get to appointments. Whether or not you can drive a car or fly on a plane are good questions to ask your treatment team. The answers can vary depending on where your cancer is, what treatment you are having, and how it affects you.

Can my friends and family come with me?

It is a good idea to check with your treatment centre that you can bring someone with you. Most centres allow and even encourage this. During the actual treatment, patients have to be alone, but your treatment team can talk to you and see you via an intercom and CCTV. If you take a friend or family member, they will have to wait outside the treatment room

What kind of clothes should I wear?

You can wear anything you feel comfortable in. Remember that you will need to move or take off any clothes covering the area where you need treatment. If you wear clothing for faith reasons, you will need to move it or take it off, but your team will try to support you in feeling comfortable and dignified.

Will I be radioactive?

If you have the most common type of radiotherapy – External Beam Radiation Therapy (EBRT), you will not be radioactive at any time. The only time there is any active radiation present at all is when you are in the treatment room and the machine is turned on. As soon as the machine is turned off, there is no radiation in your body or anywhere else. If you have EBRT it is safe to be around your family, loved ones, the general public, and your pets. If you have Internal Radiotherapy you will sometimes need to take precautions for a few days or weeks. However, it is usually still safe to spend time with others, including children and pets. Ask your treatment team about this so you feel confident knowing what you can and cannot do.

Am I alone during radiotherapy treatment?

During the actual treatment, you have to be alone, but your treatment team can hear and talk to you through an intercom and see you via CCTV. They will tell you how to signal if you need help.

Can I have radiotherapy more than once?

Often it is not possible to treat the exact same area more than once. But radiotherapy can be used to treat different parts of the body. For example, it can be used to help with bone pain in different areas of the body.

Should I take medications and/or vitamins while receiving treatment?

You can take your prescription medications as normal through radiotherapy. If you have any concerns about this, talk to your treatment team. Patients that take non-prescription therapies, vitamins and supplements should ask their treatment team about this. Your team might suggest not taking them while you have radiotherapy if they could have a negative impact. For example, antioxidants might reduce the effectiveness of radiation on cancer cells.

Does radiotherapy cause infertility?

Sometimes. This is more of a risk in children and young adults when the radiotherapy will come into contact with organs that are part of the reproductive system. If this applies to you, your team will talk you through your options. This might include freezing and storing eggs or sperm. We know this can be a very difficult part of cancer treatment and recommend talking to your treatment team as soon as possible.