This is a plain text version of the website text that goes with our Clinical Oncologist answering common questions video. Some small changes have been made to support user experience. Below you will also find a transcript of the video itself.

With thanks to Dr Alison Tree, Consultant Clinical Oncologist at The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust.

About Clinical Oncologists

These are specially trained doctors in cancer treatment. They will help you decide the best treatment plan for your diagnosis. They will guide you through the options: considering your medical history and personal circumstances.

You should then be able to make an informed decision about your treatment.

If you are offered radiotherapy and decide to have it, your clinical oncologist will refer you to the radiotherapy department. This referral will begin the process of ‘planning out’ the treatment.

Clinical oncologists decide the treatment plan along with dosimetrists. The treatment plan is designed by the dosimetrist on a special computer using the scans taken at your planning appointment. They will consider:

Your medical history

Where the cancer is or the target

Any sensitive structures nearby

Clinical oncologists will approve the treatment plan before it is used.

Clinical oncologists and therapeutic radiographers will monitor you through your treatment. They can offer support and advice when needed. They might refer you to other healthcare specialists who can help you.

After treatment, your clinical oncologists might book a follow up appointment with you. They will see how you are and talk through future management for your diagnosis.

Further information

Learn more information about side effects here:

https://radiotherapy.org.uk/patients-families/side-effects/

Learn more information about late effects here:

https://radiotherapy.org.uk/patients-families/late-effects/

Video transcript:

Alison is a clinical oncologist. In this video, she answers some of your questions about radiotherapy treatment.

What is a clinical oncologist?

So I'm a clinical oncologist, so that means I'm a doctor that's trained in cancer medicine, and clinical oncology specifically means that I've been trained in both the use of radiotherapy techniques and also chemotherapy or drug therapy to treat cancer.

What role do you play in my treatment?

So my role is to meet you, usually in clinic for the first time. And my job is to tell you about the cancer you have, what kind of cancer it is, whether it has spread to other parts of the body or whether it's localised to where the cancer started. And then I, my job should be to explain to you the options for how we treat that cancer. There may be only one option, there may be one recommended option or you may be presented with a range of options and those will be discussed with you depending on your priorities for your care, whether you want to prioritise cancer treatment or minimise side effects or where you would put the balance between those two things.

Is radiotherapy an effective treatment?

So radiotherapy is an excellent treatment for cancer and we've on undergone a revolution really in the last 20 years. We've come from a treatment that was very effective but sometimes and often associated with side effects to one that's really highly precise and technical, computer driven, personalised to every single patient.
So we make the radiotherapy specific to you and your anatomy and your cancer.
And that means that we're seeing increasing cure rates over time for radiotherapy treatments, and that means better quality of life, the men, women and children that we treat.

What questions should I ask you?

The questions that you ask in your consultation will be very personal to you because you are an individual. You will have different needs and priorities for your care.
And how this treatment fits in with your family and the rest of your life will be different to you.

So I think it's helpful to write down before you go to clinic what questions you want to ask. It's important to understand the kind of treatment you're being offered, whether the treatment is hopefully going to cure your cancer, whether it's going to control the cancer for a period of time. And it's also important to ask about the side effects that the treatment may be associated with. And often that can be a bit intimidating because there may be a long list of potential side effects, but nobody gets all the side effects.
The doctors just have to tell you everything that might happen. But if there are particular side effects that you're concerned about, write those down and ask the doctor that you see whether you're likely to get those ones.

What side effects can I expect?

So the side effects from radiotherapy treatments vary because radiotherapy is a very targeted treatment. We're really just shining the beams of radiation at the cancer itself.

And so you don't get side effects in the rest of your body usually. And so the side effects will depend on the healthy tissues that sit next to wherever your cancer is. So for example, if you were having a prostate cancer treated, the parts of the body that sit next to the prostate are the bladder and the bowel. And so those may have some side effects during your treatment, but it will be very individual depending on where your cancer is.

How do I know if the treatment is working?

So we know from years of experience what dose of radiation to give over what kind of schedule. But usually as you go through treatment, we don't get any signs or signals about how well the treatment is working. We just have to give you the whole course of treatment and then often follow up the cancer for many months or years afterwards to be sure that it has worked to get rid of the cancer. So it can be frustrating not to have a measure of success as you go through your treatment that the radiographer's treating you and the doctors treating you have done this lots of times before and they know the kind of treatment that is likely to result in the best outcome for you.

What is the best advice you can give before I start treatment?

The best piece of advice I could give to anyone just about to start radiotherapy treatment is to get as much information as you need. Different people want different amounts of information. Write down your questions, talk to different members of the team. You might speak to a doctor or a nurse or a therapeutic radiographer. All of these people have lots of experience they can share with you. And please don't feel scared to ask your questions.

We've looked after lots of different patients and I'm sure your question will have been answered before. So don't sit at home and worry. Please just reach out to one of your healthcare team and ask what do I need to know if I'm having more than one treatment? So sometimes you might be having treatment with radiotherapy alongside a different type of treatment like chemotherapy or other drug therapy. And it can be hard to know whether the side effects and the feelings you're experiencing are related to the radiotherapy or the chemotherapy or drug therapy you're receiving. But it's very important to tell your healthcare professional, your doctor, nurse or radiographer about all the symptoms you're experiencing. And they can try and advise you whether your symptoms are related to the radiotherapy or one of the drug therapies you're taking at the same time, as usually there are things that can be done to make those feelings and symptoms better.

What if I don't understand the information I'm given?

Sometimes when you come to your appointment, we may use medical words, and sometimes these are really confusing even for us that use them every day. So it's very important that if your doctor or nurse or radiographer has said something to you that you don't understand, that you'd ask them again to explain, perhaps in a different way or with different words, so that you can make sure you understand all the words that are being used. And it's our job to make sure that you are comfortable with what you're being told and can understand all the information about your treatment. So please do point out if we're making it difficult for you to understand.

What should I expect when I first go for treatment?

Most people having radiotherapy in the UK have external beam radiotherapy. So from your point of view, this is just like having a scan done. You go into a special room, you lie on a bed. The treatment takes about 10 minutes. There's nothing that you feel or experience during the treatment. You just need to lie still and then you can finish your treatment, get dressed, back up. You're not radioactive, you're no risk to anyone around you, and you can go about your normal life as normal for the rest of the day. And you don't have any physical sensation of the radiotherapy.

It's not painful, it's completely painless, but we know that you might feel nervous during your treatment, particularly the first one, and the radiographers are always watching in the room so that if you do have any problems, you can just indicate and they will come in and speak to you.

What other support can I get that might help?

There are lots of other sources of support while you're going through your cancer treatment. So outside of the medical team who are there to look after you, you may want to reach out to some patient support groups.

Many hospitals have them, sometimes specific to one cancer or sometimes for everyone and there are other supportive organisations such as the Maggie Centre which provides non-medical support but very important support for you as you go through your cancer journey to maximise quality of life and trying to reduce the anxiety that we know that some people go through during their treatment.

Thank you for watching, we wish you all the best with your treatment.

Ends