
Side effects from external radiotherapy to the bowel

Some side effects may occur, usually towards the end of the course of treatment and also during the first few weeks after treatment has finished. Treatments given over several weeks give more side effects than a short course of treatment.

These side effects can be upsetting and may require you to make some adjustments to your normal life, but most are temporary and will gradually disappear after a few weeks. However, some side effects may continue for, and some may only become apparent after, months or years following treatment. It is important to discuss these with your consultant as help may be available.

Radiotherapy does not make you radioactive; it is safe to be with other people, including children, throughout your treatment.

Pregnant?

Please tell the medical staff if you might be pregnant; radiotherapy can harm the developing baby.

Short term side effects

You will be monitored throughout your treatment by the radiotherapy team. Please let them know if you experience any of the following problems:

Tiredness

Radiotherapy can make you tired so you may need more rest than usual, especially if you have to travel a long way for treatment every day. It is good to try to get some exercise each day, however gentle.

Loss of appetite

Some people lose their appetite as an effect of radiotherapy. It is often better to try to eat little and often. It is also important to drink plenty of fluids, e.g. water, squash, fruit juice, milk and soups.

If you struggle to eat much, it is a good idea to supplement your meals with nutritious high-calorie drinks. These are available on prescription or can be bought from the chemists. The radiographers can arrange for you to see a dietitian who can advise you on your diet

Occasionally radiotherapy can make you feel sick (nauseous). This can often be helped by drinking more fluids. If this becomes troublesome please tell the radiotherapy team as you can be given medication to help with this.

Bowel effects

Radiotherapy can cause bowel movements to become looser, more frequent and more urgent. You may also have a slimy mucous discharge from your rectum.

You may get diarrhoea, particularly if you are also having chemotherapy; if this happens please tell the radiotherapy team. Drinking plenty of fluids and altering your diet may also help. Occasionally medication may be required. The irritation and inflammation usually settle down about two to three weeks after radiotherapy treatment ends.

Bladder irritation

Radiotherapy to the bowel often irritates the bladder. You may feel as if you have cystitis (a bladder infection) and want to pass urine all the time, but when you go you pass very little. You may feel a burning pain when you do pass urine. Try to drink plenty of fluids. Your bladder irritation will settle down after treatment is completed, but tell your doctor if it continues, in case you have an infection that needs treating with antibiotics.

Hair loss

This only occurs in the area being treated.

Skin changes

Skin reactions in the treatment area should be mild, with slight redness and itching, but your skin reaction can be affected by the dose and type of treatment that your consultant has prescribed. It can also be dependent on your type of skin, your shape, any existing conditions such as diabetes and especially if you smoke.

Tips for helping your skin include:

- Wash the skin gently using soap or aqueous cream and gently pat dry.
- To reduce irritation to the treatment area you may use a moisturiser sparingly. Your Macmillan radiographer can advise on this.
- Wear loose fitting natural fibre clothing next to the skin.
- Avoid heating and cooling pads/ice.
- Avoid hair removal products.
- Avoid adhesive tape.

After finishing treatment you may be aware of your skin reaction becoming worse for up to another two weeks. Continue with the suggested skin care tips, returning gradually to your usual skin care regime when your skin has returned to normal.

.Still smoking?

Smoking during treatment could reduce the success of your treatment. Please ask for help if this is a problem for you

Long term side effects

These may include:

- Frequent bowel movements.
- Bladder shrinkage causing you to pass urine more often.
- Chronic diarrhoea and weight loss.
- Small amounts of blood in your urine and stools.

For women:

- Dryness and shrinkage of your vagina, making sex uncomfortable. This may be kept to a minimum by using vaginal dilators; if appropriate you will be given the leaflet 'Advice about using dilators after radiotherapy'.
- Early menopause.

For men:

- Difficulty getting an erection.

For both men and women:

- Loss of fertility; this will be permanent.

If you have concerns about any continuing side effects please inform your consultant.

Please use this space to write any notes or questions you may have.

Further information and advice can be obtained from:

**Kent Oncology Macmillan Cancer Information Centre,
Maidstone Hospital**

Offers support and information to anyone who has concerns about cancer (patients, relatives, friends or carers).

☎ 01622 227064

Macmillan Cancer Support

Provide practical, medical and financial information

☎ 0808 808 0000 (Free phone)

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Cancer Research

This charity provides information about cancer, treatment and clinical trials.

☎ 0808 800 4040

Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

Patient Experience Teams (PALS) for East Kent patients

Kent and Canterbury Hospital

Desk at the outpatient's entrance of the hospital

Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother Hospital

Office at the main entrance of the hospital (Ramsgate Road)

William Harvey Hospital

Desk at the main entrance of the hospital

☎ 01227 783145 or 01227864314

E mail: ekh-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net

*The information in this leaflet has been taken from information provided by Cancer Research UK.

MTW NHS Trust is committed to making its patient information accessible in a range of languages and formats. If you need this leaflet in another language or format please ask one of your clinical care team or the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). We will do our best to arrange this.

Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust welcomes all forms of feedback from our service users. If the standard of service you have received from the Trust does not meet your expectations, we want to hear from you. Please speak with the ward manager or the nurse in charge in the first instance, or you can contact the **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)** on:

Telephone: ☎ 01622 224960 or ☎ 01892 632953

Email: mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net

or visit their office at either Maidstone or Tunbridge Wells Hospital between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

You can be confident that your care will not be affected by highlighting any areas of concern or making a complaint. The Trust will retain a record of your contact, which is held separately to any medical records. If you are acting on behalf of a patient, we may need to obtain the patient's consent in order to protect patient confidentiality. More information on PALS or making a complaint can be found on the Trust's website: www.mtw.nhs.uk or pick up a leaflet from main reception.

Issue date: November 2015
Database reference: RWF-OPLF-PCS42

Review date: November 2018
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