

## Kent Oncology Centre

# Radiotherapy Side Effects and Management: Gynaecological Cancer

### Information for patients

We hope this leaflet will help you understand the side effects that may occur when having external radiotherapy to the female pelvis. It also explains the best management of these side effects. If you would like to speak to one of the radiotherapy team please feel free to contact them on the numbers given below:

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist

 01622 225094

 07825 978632

**Maidstone Hospital**

Appointment enquiries

 01622 225080

**Kent and Canterbury Hospital**

Appointment enquiries

 01227 783010

You will be given a copy of our leaflet 'External Beam Radiotherapy' which we advise you to read alongside this leaflet; it provides general information about radiotherapy and useful contact numbers. If you have not been given a copy please ask.

Our leaflets can also be found on the **Kent Oncology Centre website:**  
[www.kentoncologycentre.nhs.uk](http://www.kentoncologycentre.nhs.uk)

### Side effects of external radiotherapy to the female pelvis

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.

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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 and a Macmillan radiographer. Please let them know if you experience any of the following problems:

### **Tiredness**

You may find that you become more tired as your treatment continues. This is very common with radiotherapy and is caused partly by the travelling back and forth to hospital, and partly by the treatment itself. Rest if you need to but 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 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 but medication can be prescribed if needed.

### **Bowel effects**

Radiotherapy can cause bowel movements to become looser, more frequent and more urgent. You may get diarrhoea and medication may be required to control it.

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Drinking plenty of fluids and altering your diet may help. The bowels usually settle down about two to three weeks after radiotherapy treatment ends.

### **Bladder irritation**

Radiotherapy to the female pelvis 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.

The irritation should settle a few weeks after treatment is completed, but tell your GP if it continues, in case you have an infection that needs treating with antibiotics.

### **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.

If your skin does blister and break down please tell the radiotherapy team; they can advise you on how to manage this, using special dressings if appropriate.

### **Hair loss**

This only occurs in the area being treated.

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### 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 side effects will be permanent and can include:

- Early menopause.
- Loss of fertility. If you may wish to have a child in the future you should discuss with your consultant, before treatment begins, the possibility of 'egg harvesting'.
- 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**.
- Swelling of legs (lymphoedema).
- Frequent bowel movements.
- Bladder shrinkage causing you to pass urine more often.
- Small amounts of blood in your urine and stools.
- Chronic diarrhoea and weight loss.

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.**

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## 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 support information

☎ 0808 808 0000 (Free phone)

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

### **NHS Choices for cancer information prescriptions**

Website: [www.nhs.uk/ipg](http://www.nhs.uk/ipg)

### **Cancer Research**

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

☎ 0808 800 4040

Website: [www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://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 01227 864314

Email: [ekh-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net](mailto:ekh-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net)

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\*The information in this leaflet has been taken from information provided by Macmillan Cancer Support.

**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](mailto: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](http://www.mtw.nhs.uk) or pick up a leaflet from main reception.

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