

Kent Oncology Centre
**Radiotherapy Side Effects and
Management: Head and Neck
Cancer**

Information for patients

We hope this leaflet will help you understand the side effects that may occur when having external radiotherapy to the head and neck. 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:


Maidstone Hospital

Macmillan Head & Neck Radiographer  07884 073858

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists  01622 225094

Appointment enquiries  01622 225080

Kent & Canterbury Hospital

Macmillan Head & Neck Radiographer  01227 766877
Ext 722 2711

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

Side effects of external radiotherapy to the head and neck

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

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. A sore, dry mouth can also make eating difficult. If you struggle to eat much, it is a good idea to supplement or replace your meals with nutritious high-calorie drinks, which can be supplied initially by our dietitian and are subsequently available on prescription.

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.

Loss of taste

If part or all of your mouth is treated, then your sense of taste will quickly change during radiotherapy. Some people lose their sense of taste completely while others find that everything tastes the same as each other (usually rather metallic, salty, or like cardboard). Although your sense of taste will recover, it may take six weeks or more for it to return to normal after the treatment.

Dry mouth

You may not produce as much saliva as before treatment. The lining of your mouth and throat may become dry, making eating and speech difficult. You may also notice a feeling of sticky mucous in the throat, as radiotherapy can make the saliva thick and stringy. Steam inhalation may help along with regular sips of water. To reduce the dry feeling, you may also find it helpful to use an artificial saliva spray which we can supply to you.

Although you may start to produce some saliva again within a few months of treatment, it is important to be aware that the problem might continue for some time. If your mouth, throat or the upper part of your neck is being treated, your mouth may become permanently dry. We can give you advice about coping with the long term effects of a dry mouth.

Skin changes

The skin over your face and neck is very likely to gradually redden or darken and become itchy and sore (like sunburn). Sometimes the skin will peel or flake resulting in a sore and weepy skin reaction. You will be prescribed painkillers to help until your skin heals.

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.

Still smoking?

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

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 (your Macmillan radiographer can advise on this)
- Do not use any perfumes, make up, pre-shave and/or aftershave on the treated area
- Avoid heating and cooling pads/ice
- Men wishing to shave their face are advised to only use an electric razor or not to shave at all whilst on treatment as wet shaving can further irritate the skin
- Avoid wearing collars and ties; loose, natural fibre clothing is more comfortable
- If your skin peels, dressings may be provided to aid comfort
- Ensure the treated skin is covered when out in the sun; your skin may be more sensitive to the sun especially in your first year after treatment so it is advisable to apply a high factor sun screen

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.

Sore mouth and throat

Your mouth and throat will probably become sore and inflamed and you may develop some mouth ulcers. Your voice may also become hoarse. You may become sensitive to very strong flavours and/or extreme heat and cold. Eating food may become difficult and swallowing painful.

If this happens, painkillers, mouthwashes and protective gels that coat the lining of the mouth can be provided to help ease the symptoms. You will be advised to eat soft food and to avoid smoking, drinking spirits and eating hot or spicy foods. Drinking plenty of bland, cool fluids e.g. milk or water will help to keep your mouth moist.

You will be able to discuss any problems with a speech and language therapist and/or a dietitian.

If you have had a PEG (feeding) tube inserted before starting radiotherapy you will be seen regularly by the dietetic team and/or our nurse who can advise about the management of the PEG and when to start using it.

Once the course of radiotherapy has finished, your mouth will gradually heal. Some people can return to eating their usual diet a few weeks after treatment has finished, while others may take longer. If you have a PEG it will remain in place until you are able to return to your usual diet.

Dental care

Your saliva normally acts as a protective film. If you have a dry mouth, your teeth will be much more prone to tooth decay so you will need to take special care. Please follow the dental hygiene advice that you are given, such as brushing regularly with a soft toothbrush. If you need any dental extractions these should be carried out before starting radiotherapy.

Hair loss

Hair only falls out where the x-ray beam enters and leaves the body. The radiotherapy team will advise you where you are likely to lose hair and if it will be permanent. Men may lose their beard permanently in those areas of skin that become red or dark and sore during treatment.

Stiff jaw

Treatment and procedures to the back of the mouth and throat can lead to stiffness of the jaw. You will be given exercises to do in order to prevent this from becoming a permanent problem.

If the radiotherapy is to the back of your throat (nasopharynx), the muscles used to open and close your mouth can also become stiff. You will be shown mouth-opening exercises that you should do at least twice a day. There are also specialist aids available to help exercise your jaw. Your speech and language therapist can give you advice about exercises and where to get an exercise aid.

Bad breath

This can develop during treatment and may be helped by regular mouth care and mouth washes. Your Macmillan radiographer or nurse will be able to advise you on how to do this effectively. You may also be prescribed an antibiotic medicine that can help.

Long term side effects

These side effects, some of which can be permanent, can include:

- Dry mouth – saliva is often decreased permanently; artificial saliva products can help
 - Swallowing difficulties – may occasionally require long term use of a feeding tube
 - Discoloration of skin in the treated area - this may be improved by the use of moisturisers
 - Hardening of the underlying tissue in the treatment area (fibrosis)
 - Underactive thyroid – this can easily be treated with medication
 - Difficulty opening mouth - your speech and language therapist will encourage you to do jaw exercises to help with this
 - Increased chance of dental decay/infections
 - Damage to bone in treated area – this can be treated but is best avoided, so our team takes precautions to reduce the risk
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Unfortunately doctors can't tell beforehand who will develop long term side effects and who won't. People vary quite widely in their reactions to radiotherapy and a few seem to be more than usually sensitive. It is important to remember that treating your cancer is the priority. However, your radiotherapy specialist team will do all they can to reduce the risk of any long term side effects. They will discuss any possible side effects with you before you agree to have treatment.

Further information and advice

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 01227 864314

Email: ekh-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net

*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

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.

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