

Kent Oncology Centre



# Side Effects and Management for Radiotherapy to Chest, Neck and/or Axilla

## Information for patients

We hope this leaflet will help you understand the side effects that may occur when having external radiotherapy to the chest, neck and/or axilla. 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 Radiotherapy Specialists  
Appointment enquiries

 01622 225094  
 01622 225080

### **Kent and Canterbury Hospital**

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists  
Appointment enquiries

 01227 766877  
ext. 722 2711  
 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.

**Kent Oncology Centre website:** [www.kentoncologycentre.nhs.uk](http://www.kentoncologycentre.nhs.uk)

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## Side effects of external radiotherapy to the chest, neck and/or axilla

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 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 goes on. This is very common with radiotherapy. It is partly the travelling back and forth to hospital, and partly an effect of the treatment itself. You may need to rest more than usual. It is good to try to get some exercise each day, however gentle.

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## **Loss of appetite and sickness**

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 but medication can be prescribed if needed.

## **Difficulty swallowing**

Radiotherapy to the area over the breast bone can make your food pipe (oesophagus) inflamed, causing discomfort; you may not be able to swallow properly towards the end of your course of treatment and for two to three weeks afterwards. The radiotherapy team can prescribe medicines to help.

You are advised to eat soft food and not to smoke, drink spirits or eat hot or spicy foods. You should drink plenty of fluids such as milk and water.

This advice is also given if the upper part of your neck is being treated with radiotherapy as your throat and mouth can become dry, making swallowing more uncomfortable.

## **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. Advice can be provided to help you stop smoking.

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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. The radiographers can advise on this.
- Wear loose fitting natural fibre clothing next to the skin.
- 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 heating and cooling pads/ice.
- Avoid hair removal products.
- Avoid adhesive tape.
- Ensure the skin is covered when out in the sun. Your skin may be more sensitive, especially in your first year after treatment; 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.

## **Cough**

If you are having your chest treated you may notice a dry, tickly cough towards the end of the course of radiotherapy. However, this can occur up to six weeks after finishing treatment. If you are concerned please contact your GP or tell your consultant.

## **Hair loss**

This only occurs in the area being treated, so could be under your arms, at the nape of your neck or on your chest. Your radiotherapy team will show you the areas where you might lose hair. The hair usually grows back within a few months, but it can be patchy.

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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

- **Underactive thyroid** – this will be monitored with an annual blood test.
- **Lymphoedema** – a swelling of the arm on the treated side; a referral can be made to a specialist nurse for help with this.

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.

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**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 information

☎ 0808 808 0000 (Free phone)

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

**Cancer Research**

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

☎ 0808 800 4040

Website: [www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

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## 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

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

**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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