Radiotherapy to the Prostate

Information for patients

Northern Centre for Cancer Care

Freeman Hospital
Introduction

Your oncologist has advised you to have a course of radiotherapy to your prostate as part of your treatment for prostate cancer.

This leaflet has been written to give you general information and answer some of the questions you may have about the side effects of radiotherapy.

We hope you will find this helpful. If you have any further questions relating to your treatment, please do not hesitate to ask your radiographer, specialist nurse or oncologist.

Possible short term (acute) side effects

Acute side effects are temporary and affect most patients. The side effects generally develop during the second half of the course of treatment, last for several weeks after the treatment has finished and then usually settle within the next three to four months.

♦ Effects on the skin

Towards the end of treatment some patients experience some changes in the skin affecting the area that has been treated. The skin may

♦ feel tight and uncomfortable
♦ become pink or red
♦ become dry and flaky
♦ itch

Your skin will be monitored by your radiographers during radiotherapy and you will be given advice on how to care for it. Skin reactions may sometimes persist for up to six weeks after treatment has finished.

What can I do to help?

♦ Wear loose, preferably cotton, clothing that does not rub the skin and will allow air to circulate.
♦ Do not soak the area in the bath or under a long hot shower. You may wash the treated area using a simple, unperfumed soap applying gently with your hands rinsing the area well with warm water. Avoid using flannels or sponges. Pat the area dry with a soft towel or let the skin dry naturally.

♦ Do not use talcum powder, bubble baths, bath salts, shower gels or body lotions in the treated area as they tend to be highly perfumed and can dry or irritate the skin. You may be given a moisturising cream from the radiographers or nurses to soothe the skin, or your oncologist may prescribe a cream if needed.

♦ Tiredness / Fatigue

Radiotherapy can sometimes make you feel very tired especially towards the end of your course of radiotherapy and for a number of weeks following treatment. You should rest as much as you need to. It may be some time before you feel able to do some of your usual activities.

Fatigue is something nearly everyone with cancer feels. It affects people differently and it is important to tell the health care team if you are feeling more tired than usual. There are some physical causes, such as anaemia that are readily treatable. Please ask for a booklet on Fatigue at the Information Centre in NCCC which may give you tips to help with this.

♦ Changes to your urinary system

During your course of radiotherapy you may experience changes to your urinary symptoms, especially in the last few weeks and on completion of the radiotherapy. If you already have some problems with passing urine, unfortunately these may become worse. You may begin to experience some burning or stinging when you pass urine, sometimes called cystitis. You may feel the need to pass urine more frequently, especially at night. This could also coincide with a strong urgency to pass urine.

What can I do to help?

Whilst having radiotherapy:
♦ Drink at least eight cups of fluid a day. Don’t be tempted to drink less.
Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol or drinks containing caffeine e.g. tea, coffee, coca-cola. They can all make any urinary problems worse.

**Altered bowel habits**

Changes in your bowel habits can occur during radiotherapy. If diarrhoea is a problem this is often very mild and changing to a low fibre diet can often help. A dietary advice leaflet is available from your treatment radiographers. Sometimes you may feel that you want to open your bowels frequently but only a small stool or no motion is passed. You may even pass mucus or a small amount of blood, this is called tenemus and you should talk to your specialist nurse or oncologist about this. Again, a low fibre diet can help and medication may be required.

Your bowel habits may continue to be disrupted for several weeks following radiotherapy but it should resolve. Please tell your oncologist or specialist nurse if it does not.

**Your emotions**

It is important to make time for yourself. Emotions associated with the reactions to a diagnosis of prostate cancer may come to the surface at various stages during your treatment.

Don’t worry if you feel low, this can be normal. If you need to talk to someone, please ask, we are here to help. We have a wide range of support services within the department, such as Macmillan nurses, dietician and social worker. A Clinical Psychology service is also available at NCCC on referral from your oncologist.

**Sex**

Sexual activity is personal to each individual and may be an aspect of your life about which you have concerns relating to your disease or treatment. You may have questions you wish to ask.

**Impotence or sexual problems**

Most men will lose interest in the sexual aspect of their relationship and may be unable to get an erection. This is due to the hormone
treatment but radiotherapy may also cause these problems. We understand that this may be a difficult problem to discuss. Your specialist nurse will be able to advise you on the different treatments available to help. Please talk to your oncologist, specialist nurse or radiographer if you would like to talk about these issues confidentially. There is more information available in the Information Centre at NCCC.

**How else can I help myself during treatment?**

You can help by doing these things…

- Don’t try to lose weight.
- Try not to smoke. It can make your side effects worse.
- Tell us if you are worried about your side effects, or if you feel unwell, or if you have any problems or questions.

**Possible long-term or permanent effects of treatment.**

The likelihood of these effects is small and vary from person to person. Your oncologist will have discussed these effects at the time of your consent to treatment.

**Your progress**

You will be seen by a member of your specialist team once a week during your treatment. This will be an opportunity to discuss any concerns or problems you may have.

**Please tell your treatment radiographers if you have any problems between appointments.**

**After your radiotherapy has finished**

The side effects of treatment can continue for several weeks after radiotherapy has finished. Continue with your skincare routine until any changes return to normal. If you have altered you diet or decreased your caffeine intake then you will need to continue with this until your symptoms have improved.
You will be given a discharge letter with a copy for your GP summarising any side effects you may have and any creams or medication you have been prescribed at NCCC.

If you are worried about your side effects after your treatment has finished, please contact your specialist nurse or the NCCC Information Centre for further advice.

**Follow up**

You will be sent a follow up appointment to see your specialist team six to 12 weeks after finishing treatment; this may be at the Northern Centre for Cancer Care or the original hospital where you first saw your oncology consultant. You will then be seen every three to six months after that.

During this appointment your Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) blood test will be taken to assess your response to treatment. Your prostate may also be examined but not necessarily at each visit. At the clinic you will have the opportunity to discuss your disease and the treatment you have received. You will also have the opportunity to discuss any concerns or worries you may have following your treatment.
Useful contacts:

Northern Centre for Cancer Care Macmillan Information and Support Centre
0191 2138611
Opening hours
Monday to Friday from 9am to 4.30pm

Uro Oncology Nurse Practitioner
Northern Centre for Cancer Care
Freeman Hospital

Tel: 0191 2838377

Or ask for Dect 39313 (Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm)

Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
www.newcastle-hospitals.org.uk

CancerBACUP
freephone 0808 800 1234
www.cancerbacup.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Relief
Head office 020 7840 7840
freephone 0808 800 1234
www.macmillan.org.uk

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