

High Dose Rate Brachytherapy for Cancer of the Oesophagus (gullet)

Information for Patients

**Northern Centre for Cancer Care
(NCCC)
Freeman Hospital**

NORTHERN CENTRE FOR
CANCER CARE



Introduction

Your doctor has decided that you should have internal radiotherapy (also known as high dose rate (HDR) Brachytherapy) to treat your cancer. This leaflet explains what you can expect. We hope it answers some of the questions you may have. Please tell us if there is anything you don't understand. We are here to help and we don't mind how many questions you ask.

What is Brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy is a type of radiotherapy which is given internally (inside the body).

It can be used as the main treatment or as part of a combination of treatments which may include surgery, chemotherapy and external beam radiotherapy.

The machine which delivers the brachytherapy is called the Micro-Selectron. The treatment is given by introducing a small sealed radiation source (iridium), which emits gamma rays over a very short distance. These gamma rays destroy the cancer cells in the part of the body we wish to treat. There is no risk of contamination from this sealed radioactive source at any time during the procedure, and the source is removed when treatment is complete.

You may have this treatment either following a course of external beam radiotherapy to the oesophagus or as a single treatment. Your oncologist (specialist cancer doctor) will decide and explain which is best for you.

What does the treatment involve?

- First you will require an endoscopy to look at your oesophagus. As this procedure usually takes place in theatre early in the morning (around 8am), we would normally admit you to one of the wards at NCCC the day before.

What is an endoscopy?

A procedure in which an instrument called an endoscope is passed into an area of the body to better visualise that area. The endoscope usually has a fibre optic camera which allows an image to be projected onto a video screen.

- When you arrive on the ward you will be seen by a doctor who will explain the procedure to you. You will be instructed not to eat from midnight in order that the procedure can be performed.
- In the morning you will be escorted to theatre where you will be sedated. You do not need a general anaesthetic for this treatment.
- During the endoscopy, we will be able to see the cancer and will pass a narrow tube through your mouth into your oesophagus to a position indicated by what has been seen during the examination.
- An x-ray will then be taken to make sure that the tube is in the right place.

Risks of Endoscopy

Endoscopic examinations can result in complications such as reaction to medication, perforation, tear or bleeding in the area being examined. These complications are very rare (less than 1 in 1000 examinations) but may require urgent treatment, or even an operation. The possibility of complication is greater when the endoscope is also used to apply treatment. There is a small risk to crowned teeth or dental bridgework, and you should tell the doctor or nurse if you have either.

- Once the endoscopy is completed, you will be transferred to the micro-selectron treatment room on level 1 of NCCC where the brachytherapy technologists will attach the tube from your mouth to the micro-selectron machine.
- The micro-selectron machine sends the radiation source (iridium) into the tube to a position determined by the result of your endoscopy. The radiation source remains in this position for a short length of time; calculated before the treatment begins. The staff leave the room whilst the source is in place inside the tube. You are monitored constantly from outside the room via CCTV, and staff will be able to talk to you throughout the treatment.

The whole procedure will take about an hour, although actual treatment time should only be approximately 10 minutes but this can vary from patient to patient.

At the end of the treatment the radiation source is withdrawn back into the machine and the staff will return to the room to remove the tube.

Will the treatment hurt?

Putting the tube down can be a little uncomfortable but the treatment itself is painless. Many patients have no recollection of the treatment because of the sedative used.

Afterwards

After treatment you will return to the ward. You may be able to go home later in the day if you are well enough. You should be able to eat and drink two hours after the treatment.

Side effects of the treatment

You may experience some discomfort when swallowing for two to four weeks after treatment. You may be prescribed some medication to help. The dietician may be available for dietary advice.

These tips may be helpful:

- Try drinking plenty of fluids (not too hot or too cold)
- Try softer foods that will not irritate e.g. soups, minced or mashed foods, yoghurts, milky drinks and puddings. If you have a food processor try pureed food.
- Eat little and often
- Avoid highly spiced food.
- Avoid alcohol as this can be de-hydrating
- Try not to smoke. It can make your side effects worse. Please ask for help to stop smoking.
- Your G.P can prescribe some food supplements (nutritious drinks)

After about four weeks the side effects will subside and you should start to benefit from the treatment, however this benefit can vary from person to person.

In the long term, patients may sometimes develop permanent narrowing of the gullet due to scarring. This causes food to stick slightly and if this happens, it may help to undergo regular stretching of the gullet. Your oncologist will have discussed and explained the long term side effects of treatment with you during the consent process.

Your progress

Following discharge from the ward you will be reviewed in the out-patient department again by your oncologist, four to six weeks later. After that appointment we may share further appointments with your GP or local hospital team.

Useful contacts

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

Cancer Research UK
020 7061 8355, or freephone 0808 800 4040.
www.cancerhelp.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support
Telephone: 0808 808 0000
www.macmillan.org.uk

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) can offer on-the-spot advice and information about the NHS. You can contact them on freephone 0800 032 02 02 or e-mail northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk

Useful websites

If you would like further information about health conditions and treatment options, you may wish to have a look at the NHS Choices website at www.nhs.uk . On this website there is an information prescription generator www.nhs.uk/ips which brings together a wealth of approved patient information from the NHS and charity partners which you may find helpful

Information written by C. Downs & K. Hayes NCCC March 2013
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