Information for Patients

Radiotherapy to the Vulva

The Beatson
West of Scotland Cancer Centre

1053 Great Western Road,
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Radiotherapy to the Vulva

This leaflet is for patients receiving electron radiotherapy to the vulva. It describes:

• The radiotherapy planning and treatment.
• The effects you may experience during and after treatment.
• How best to cope with these effects.

The effects of treatment vary from one person to another and the information here is intended as a general guide. It does not mean you will experience all of the effects we describe. Your doctors, radiographers and nurses will explain this further when necessary.

It is important that you understand the radiotherapy and the side effects before you give your consent for treatment. If you have any questions or problems please let us know as soon as possible.

Preparation for Treatment

Before you begin your treatment we must carefully plan it. The planning takes place in a mark up room. When you are in the mark up room and the treatment room, you will be asked to remove your trousers or skirt because it is easier to lie in the correct position and is more comfortable. You will also be asked to slip your underwear down to uncover the area that is being treated. Your radiographer will ensure your dignity is maintained by covering you whenever possible.
A therapy radiographer and a Doctor may put some pen marks on your skin to mark the area to be treated. They will take a photo of the area to help the Radiographers position you each day you come for treatment. Then they will take some final measurements. The whole process should take about 10-15 minutes.

**Treatment**

Radiotherapy treatment is planned and delivered by specially trained professionals called therapy radiographers. The treatment machine is called a linear accelerator. The radiographers will explain the treatment process to you before you start.

- Your treatment will be given daily from Monday to Friday.
- The treatment is painless and usually takes about 10 minutes.
- You will lie in the position you were in when your treatment was planned in the mark up room.
- The radiographers will dim the lights for a short time while they position the treatment machine.
- The machine may come close to you and be in contact with the skin but it should not be uncomfortable. If you feel uncomfortable, let the radiographers know.
- The radiographers will then leave the room to switch the machine on.
- The machine will be on for about a minute and the radiographers will be watching you the whole time on a television screen outside.

You should not feel any different after your treatment is finished. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a radiographer.
General Advice during Treatment

There is no reason to change your lifestyle during treatment but it may help to:

- Try to get enough rest and sleep, especially when the treatment begins to make you tired. It is also important that you try to continue some of your normal daily activities. A sensible balance between rest and activity may be most beneficial. Indeed some people manage to continue working during treatment.
- Accept offers of help from family and friends if you need help around the house for example.
- Please speak to your radiographers or doctor if you have any problems.

Early Effects of Treatment

Each patient is an individual, and the effects of treatment may vary from person to person. Other than making you feel tired, radiotherapy **only affects** the area being treated.

During radiotherapy the area being treated will gradually respond in a way similar to an ‘inflammation’. This usually starts a few weeks into treatment and settles 3-4 weeks after treatment ends. All patients are different and the following is a general guide to some of the effects you **may** experience.

**Skin** - The skin in the treated area will be more sensitive and may become pink or red. Again this tends to be a couple of weeks into treatment. This can be treated with creams; however it is **very** important that you only use those given by the Beatson staff. Please let us know if you have any problems.
**Vagina** - You may develop a mild clear discharge. If you have a heavy, creamy, or discoloured discharge (yellow, green or brown) you should let your doctors or radiographers know. The vagina can also become a little inflamed which may make it more sensitive or even sore.

**Sexual Intercourse** - We generally recommend that during treatment you should avoid having sexual intercourse. When your treatment has finished it may be possible to resume normal sexual activity. Please discuss this with your doctor if you want further advice. There are also female professionals available who would be happy to talk to you. Ask your radiographers or doctor to put you in touch.

**Tiredness** - You may feel tired during your treatment and possibly for several weeks after treatment is complete.

**Pain and discomfort** - You may feel pain and discomfort in the area being treated. This will vary between individual patients. This will be managed at your review clinic by a specialist nurse. You will attend this clinic once a week.

If you have had surgery and/or chemotherapy any concerns you may have can be managed at the review clinic.
Skin Care during Treatment

Radiotherapy only affects the skin that is within the area being treated and instructions on what to avoid apply only to that area.

- You may wash providing the water is not too hot (lukewarm). You may use unperfumed soap, but try not to rub the treated area, particularly if it is red or itchy. Do not use a flannel or any other abrasive cloths. We may ask you to stop using soap towards the end of treatment. Dry carefully by gently patting your skin, particularly in any skin folds.

- Please do not use any personal feminine hygiene products, creams or lotions on the treated area as they may irritate your skin.

- We advise you not to swim during your treatment as the chlorine may irritate your skin. You can start again after your skin has settled.

- You may be more comfortable during treatment if you wear loose fitting clothes, preferably with cotton next to your skin.

It is important to remember that everyone is different and all issues will be managed on an individual basis.
Late Effects of Treatment

We believe that the benefit of your radiotherapy treatment far outweighs any risks involved. However, there are potential long-term effects that may affect a small number of people. It is important to point out again that effects can vary from person to person and your doctor will explain specific individual issues to you personally. There are also female professionals available who would be happy to talk to you.

Remember, you should consider the possibility of these risks against the potential problems of not having the treatment that has been recommended by your doctor.

After treatment ends

Any skin symptoms that have developed during treatment will wear off a few weeks after it ends, however the tiredness may take a little longer. You may begin washing normally once your skin no longer looks red or feels itchy. If your skin has peeled or become moist and sore, this may take a little longer. If you are still uncomfortable please follow the above advice until your first follow up appointment. Your radiotherapy doctor will arrange to see you 4-6 weeks after treatment ends, either at the Beatson or the hospital where you first met him/her.

Where Can I get Help?

All the staff are here to make sure your treatment goes as smoothly as possible and will try to help with any questions or problems you may have.
Further specialist help and information is available from:-

- Gynaecological Nurse Specialist; (BOC) 0141 301 7615
- Information and Support Radiographer: 0141 301 7427
- Information Radiographer and Counsellor: 0141 301 7423

The Beatson Cancer Centre has a Radiotherapy Advice Line available for patients who have completed treatment. It is an answer phone service which is checked at regular intervals. Please leave your name telephone number and brief description of your concern. We will call you back as soon as possible.

Tel: 0141 301 7432

We also have an Information Centre on Level 1 in the Beatson where you can find further information and signposting to other services. Tel: 0141 301 7390
Counselling and Psychology Service

This leaflet deals with the physical aspects of your treatment, but your emotional well being is just as important to us. Being diagnosed with cancer can be a distressing time for you and those closest to you. At times it can also be difficult coping with treatment. Within the department we have a counselling and clinical psychology service that may be able to help with worries and difficulties you might be having, before, during or after treatment. If you think this may be helpful to you, please ask staff to put you in touch.

There are also voluntary organisations providing information and support. These include;

- **Macmillan Cancer Support.** 0808 808 0000
  www.macmillan.org.uk
  Providing practical, medical, emotional and financial advice for those affected by cancer.

- **Maggie’s Centre, The Gatehouse:** 0141 330 3311
  Maggie’s Gartnavel: 0141 357 2269
  Maggie’s Centre, Wishaw General Hospital: 01698 358392
  The Centre provides a comprehensive cancer support programme for people and their families affected by cancer.

- **The Calman Cancer Support Centre Cancer Support Scotland (Tak Tent), Gartnavel Complex:** 0800 652 4531
  Provides emotional and practical support on a one-to-one basis and through community based groups. Complementary therapies available.
• **Macmillan Benefits Team (within the Beatson)**
  0141 301 7374

  Provides free and confidential advice for people affected by cancer and their carers.

• **Beatson Cancer Centre** – if you want to find out more about our Centre please visit:
  www.beatson.scot.nhs.uk