

# Head and Neck Cancer – After Radiotherapy

Follow up information for patients



## Introduction

This booklet provides information for patients completing a course of chemo-radiotherapy or radiotherapy for head and neck cancer at The Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre.

It describes:

- Who to contact if you have any questions or concerns.
- Your follow up appointments.
- The common side effects and how best to cope with them.
- How to look after yourself now that treatment has finished.

If you have any questions please speak to a member of the team here at the Beatson, your local hospital team or GP.

## Contact Information

**Cancer Treatment Helpline for urgent calls.** This is for patients on or **within 6 weeks of treatment** who have **urgent or severe symptoms** such as:

- Shivering or flu-like symptoms.
- Temperature greater than 37.5°C.
- Gum/nose bleeds or unusual bruising.
- Worsening or sudden breathlessness.
- Leg weakness/difficulty walking.
- Severe nausea/vomiting/diarrhoea/constipation.
- Sudden increased or uncontrolled pain.
- Other concerning symptoms associated with your cancer treatment.

The line is available 24 hours for emergencies, although it would be helpful if you called early in the day if this is at all possible.

**For Urgent Calls:**

**Beatson 8am-8pm ☎ 0141 301 7990**

**National 8pm-8am ☎ 0800 917 7711**

Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNS): ☎ 0141 301 7588 / 7589

Advanced Practitioner Radiographer: ☎ 0141 301 9901

✉ [Lisa.Hay@ggc.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:Lisa.Hay@ggc.scot.nhs.uk)

Radiotherapy Advice Line: ☎ 0141 301 7432

Dietician: 🌐 [www.beatson.scot.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/wards-departments/dietetics/](http://www.beatson.scot.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/wards-departments/dietetics/)

Secretaries to:

Dr Wilson ☎ 0141 301 7131

Dr Paterson ☎ 0141 301 7066

Dr Grose ☎ 0141 301 7070

Dr Schipani ☎ 0141 301 7072

Dr Lamb ☎ 0141 301 7060

Dr Vohra ☎ 0141 301 7069

Macmillan Information and Support Centre (Level 1 in Beatson):

☎ 0141 301 7390

Out of Hours NHS 24: ☎ 111

## When will I have a follow up appointment?

- The follow-up clinic for head and neck cancer patients is at your referring hospital. It will be with the surgical team who originally referred you to your consultant oncologist. Both the oncology and surgical teams remain in close contact regarding your progress.
- **1 week after treatment:** Around 1 week after you complete your treatment, the clinical nurse specialists at The Beatson will call to see how you are.
- **6-8 weeks after treatment:** Your first clinic follow up appointment is usually 6-8 weeks after you have completed your radiotherapy. It is with your surgical team and they will see you regularly thereafter.

## What will happen at my follow up appointments?

At your follow up appointments we will ask about how you are feeling generally and whether you have any new problems. Please remember to bring a note of your current medication to the appointment.

We will also weigh you and ask about what you are managing to eat and drink. A dietician may be available if necessary.

We may also ask you about the following:

- Voice quality.
- Tiredness.
- Dry mouth.
- Changes in taste.
- Swallowing function.

This information allows us to assess how you are recovering from your treatment.

We will also ask about smoking. **It is vital that you stop smoking** as you are otherwise at risk of complications from the treatment as well as developing further cancer(s). Help and advice to stop smoking is available from your GP practice, local pharmacy and also from **Smokeline: 0800 84 84 84**.

If you have any concerns whilst you are waiting on your follow up appointment, please do not hesitate to contact any of the numbers at the start of this leaflet.

## **Side Effects**

This is a general guide to some of the side effects you may experience as a result of your treatment. It also provides information on how best to look after yourself. More detailed information can be found in the leaflet you were given at the start of your treatment- Radiotherapy and Chemoradiotherapy to the head and neck area.

### **Infection (Chemotherapy)**

If you have had chemotherapy as part of your treatment, remember that you may still be prone to infection for a few weeks after your last dose. So if you feel unwell, you need to contact your GP or out of hours service urgently. If you have a temperature and have recently had chemotherapy you must seek medical attention immediately or call the Cancer Treatment Helpline on the telephone numbers at the start of this leaflet.

### **Dry Mouth**

A dry mouth is very common after some types of radiotherapy treatment. We can provide information about the use of artificial saliva preparations as well as general advice to help manage this side effect. Please contact your local clinical nurse specialist at your referring hospital to discuss.

There are several other side effects of radiotherapy. These depend on the area of the head and neck treated.

## Taste Changes

Radiotherapy to the head and neck can cause damage to the surface of your tongue, mouth, nose or throat. This can result in a change to the smell and taste of food.

Common changes in taste include:

- Foods may taste differently than before- very bitter, sweet or salty.
- You may have a metallic or chemical taste in your mouth.
- Some foods may taste bland.
- All foods may taste the same.
- You may no longer like foods you previously enjoyed.

Taste changes caused by your treatment usually resolve over time, however, for some people they can last for a year or longer. They can impact on your enjoyment of eating and drinking. As a result, you may not eat or drink enough to get proper nutrition. This can be frustrating and upsetting at times.

Here are some suggestions to help manage these changes:

- Eat small, frequent meals throughout the day.
- Have snacks handy.
- Try different foods. Your sense of taste may have changed and you may enjoy different foods than before.
- Milkshakes, puddings, sauces and gravies can provide extra calories. They can also act as a lubricant when eating.
- If you no longer like tea or coffee, try fruit teas or flavoured water. Avoid citrus flavours as these may make your mouth sore.
- Avoid any acidic additives if your mouth has sores/ulcers.

## **Skin Reaction**

### **How do I look after my skin when radiotherapy has ended?**

- If you have developed a skin reaction during your radiotherapy, it can become worse in the 10-14 days after your treatment.
- You should continue to look after your skin the way you were during treatment until any skin reaction has settled. You can then go back to your normal skin care routine.
- If your skin breaks, peels or you have a discharge, stop using any creams given to you during treatment. You should speak to your GP as you may need to have dressings applied to this area. These relieve discomfort and help prevent infection.
- If you needed dressings to your skin during radiotherapy, our out- patient nurses will arrange for your district nurse to continue this care after you have completed your radiotherapy.
- If there is a discoloured or offensive smelling discharge from your skin this may mean there is an infection. You may need antibiotics for this. Please speak to your GP.

## **Feelings and Emotions**

Sometimes people can feel very anxious or low in mood at this time. If you feel like this, please tell your GP as there is usually something which can be done to help you. There is a counselling and clinical psychology service available here in the Beatson. If you would like to be referred this can be done by contacting a member of staff using the details provided earlier in this booklet. We also have a Macmillan Information and Support Centre which holds a wide range of information about cancer, coping with effects and support services that may be available in your own local area.

# What can I do to look after myself?

## Diet and Nutrition

- It is very important that you continue to get enough nutrition after your treatment. Monitoring your weight weekly can be useful as a guide to let you know if you are getting enough.
- To help maintain your weight and recover from treatment you may need additional nutrition. This can come from food fortification. This simply means adding extra calories to your food e.g. adding butter and cream to mashed potatoes or oral nutritional supplement drinks which are available from your GP or community dietician.
- In some cases you may be unable to meet your nutritional needs with oral diet/fluids. Having a feeding tube inserted in your nose or stomach to help supplement your intake may therefore be advised.
- If soreness in your mouth or throat is stopping you eating or drinking, you may need to take stronger painkillers. Please speak to your GP about this.
- If you have been discharged from our ward in the Beatson and feel you need further advice on any of these issues, please ask your dietician in the community or when you attend your clinic appointment in your local hospital.
- If you are unsure how to contact a dietician, ask your GP practice. The dietician section on the Beatson website also has some useful information (see contacts at the beginning of this leaflet).



## General Advice

As a general guide, to help reduce side effects it helps if you can:

- Drink 2 litres of water per day. Avoid alcoholic drinks.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Stop smoking.

Again, please contact us on the numbers given earlier in this booklet, or your own GP if you have questions or concerns.

## Medications after treatment

- When you finish your treatment, you should contact your GP to let them know what medications you are on. If you need more, you should request these from your GP. Your GP and community pharmacy should be able to continue to supply these for you. Sometimes it can be difficult to get further supplies out with the Beatson. If you have problems please contact or ask your local pharmacy to contact the Oncology Pharmacist on 0141 301 7409.

## How long should I stay on painkillers?

- Painkillers are not part of the treatment as such. They are there to help reduce the pain or soreness caused by the radiotherapy treatment. You need to stay on them as long as you have pain or soreness.
- It is important that you have adequate pain relief to make you feel comfortable and to allow you to eat and drink. This is best achieved by taking your pain medication regularly.
- As the reaction to your treatment settles down in the weeks after you finish radiotherapy, you will be able to reduce the painkillers you are taking. If you need advice on reducing or stopping your painkillers please contact your GP. If you take a morphine based painkiller you must see your GP before reducing or stopping it.

- If the pain or soreness suddenly gets worse, it may mean you have an infection. This can normally be treated with a short course of antibiotics from your GP. They may ask for you to be seen earlier at the out-patient clinic.

## Dental Health

This is important to all patients whether you have your own teeth or wear dentures. You can be more prone to dental problems after radiotherapy to the head and neck area so if you need advice on routine brushing and hygiene, please see your dentist.

- It is important to brush your teeth even if you are not eating or are unable to swallow.
- If you have your own teeth you must have a dental check up at least every 6 months and tell your dentist you have had radiotherapy.
- Your dentist will try to avoid removing any teeth if at all possible. If you really need this, he or she may carry this out or may refer you to a dental hospital. Antibiotics may be given if dental work is carried out.
- If you have dentures you must have these checked regularly to make sure they still fit correctly.
- Osteonecrosis or osteoradionecrosis is a rare late complication of radiotherapy and surgery. This is damage to the jaw bone. This was discussed with you by the team at the Beatson before you started your radiotherapy treatment. If you develop pain or discomfort in the bone of your jaw please seek advice from your GP or surgeon. This complication may simply require antibiotics or pain killers to treat it. Very occasionally surgery may be required to remove the damaged bone.

## **How do we know if the cancer has gone?**

At your follow-up appointments, your doctor will examine the area where the cancer was originally. This may involve looking into your mouth, throat, nose or ear. In some cases we may do this using a 'scope'.

We will also examine your neck. This is to check that any lymph glands that were enlarged have gone and no new glands have appeared.

In most cases the questions and examinations described above are the best way of assessing whether there is cancer present.

## **Will I have a scan?**

Your doctor may request for you to have a scan. This is usually 3-4 months after you finish your treatment.

## **Further follow up**

You will be asked to regularly attend the Surgical Outpatient Clinic at your referring hospital. It is important that you attend these appointments. If you are not able to attend you should contact the number provided on your appointment card and make an alternative appointment.

You will usually have follow up appointments for five years. At this point a decision will be made if you need to continue to be followed up.

## **A final word**

This leaflet is a general guide to what to expect after radiotherapy and how best to cope. Please remember it is important to let us know how you are coping and feeling, and if there are any sudden changes that concern you. It is also important to know that all the staff caring for you are happy to answer any further questions or concerns, so please get in touch with us if you need to.

# Care Opinion

We welcome your comments and feedback about our service.  
If you would like to give us feedback please go to:

🌐 [www.careopinion.org.uk](http://www.careopinion.org.uk) or telephone:

☎ **0900 122 3135** or scan the QR code:



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