

Information for Patients Receiving Radiotherapy for a Spinal Cord Compression



This leaflet is for patients receiving radiotherapy to their spine for a cord compression. It describes:

- What is radiotherapy?
- How your radiotherapy is planned and treated.
- The effects that you may experience during and after treatment, and how best to cope with them.
- Who to contact if you have any questions or concerns.

What is Radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is the use of carefully measured doses of radiation to treat cancer. The aim of your treatment is to reduce pressure on your spinal cord by shrinking the tumour. This can help to offer relief from some of your symptoms, including:

- Back pain.
- Unsteadiness on your feet, weakness, difficulty walking.
- Muscle weakness – heavy or stiff limbs.
- Difficulty controlling your bladder/ bowels.

Most patients having radiotherapy are treated using a high energy beam of X-rays, by a machine called a linear accelerator.

It is likely you will be an in-patient for the duration of your radiotherapy treatment. Your doctor will tell you exactly how many treatments you will have. As a guide it can be between 1 and 5 treatments.

Therapy radiographers operate the radiotherapy planning and treatment machines. They will be able to answer any questions or concerns that you may have. We have male and female staff.

If you are in doubt about anything or have any questions or problems, please let us know as soon as possible.

Preparation for treatment

If you are having your cervical spine (neck level) treated, it is sometimes necessary to have a special shell or mask made. This helps to keep your head and neck still during planning and treatment. You will visit the Mould Room to have this made. Having the shell made is not painful. It has an open area over your nose and mouth so you can breathe normally. The staff will explain everything to you.

You will wear this mask for each radiotherapy appointment.



Picture 1 - Shell

How is my treatment planned?

Before you have your radiotherapy planned it is likely that you will have had an MRI scan. This may have been at the Beatson or at your local referring hospital.

Unfortunately we can't use scans you have already had done to plan your treatment. You will therefore need to have a CT scan, done here in the Beatson at the CT simulator. The images from this scan will be used to plan your radiotherapy. You won't get any results from it.



Picture 2- CT simulator

Your radiographers will transfer you onto a special couch. You will be lying on your back with your head on a special headrest. You will need to lie in this position for your treatment as well. Please let your radiographers know if you are uncomfortable.

If you had a shell made, you will wear it for this scan.

Your radiographers will put some pen marks on your skin or shell and place some stickers on top. They will then leave the room to start the scan. They are watching you through a window. It is important that you stay as still as you can during the scan. It will only take a few minutes. You won't feel anything.

When your scan has finished, your radiographers will replace the pen marks with three little permanent marks (tattoos) which looks like tiny freckles. If you have a shell, the marks will be put on your shell. This planning appointment will take about 20 minutes.

How is my radiotherapy treatment delivered?

You will have your first treatment on the same day or within a few days of your planning scan.

Your radiographers will position you just as you were in the CT simulator. It is important that you stay as still as you can during treatment and breathe normally. Your radiographers leave the room while the machine is on but they are monitoring you on closed circuit TV. The treatment machine moves round about you, but it will not touch you. There is nothing to feel during treatment or immediately afterwards.

Your treatment usually takes around 10 minutes. Please speak to your radiographers if you have any questions or problems. If you have a shell, you will wear it for each treatment.



Picture 3- Linear accelerator

If I am staying in the ward, when will I have my treatment?

If you are an inpatient, your radiographers will request a hospital porter to bring you down for your treatment. They will try to call for you when it is quiet. This helps to reduce the amount of time you are out of the ward. This can be between 8.15am - 6.30pm. Some patients are treated at the weekend.

If you have visitors when you are called for your treatment, you can bring them down with you.

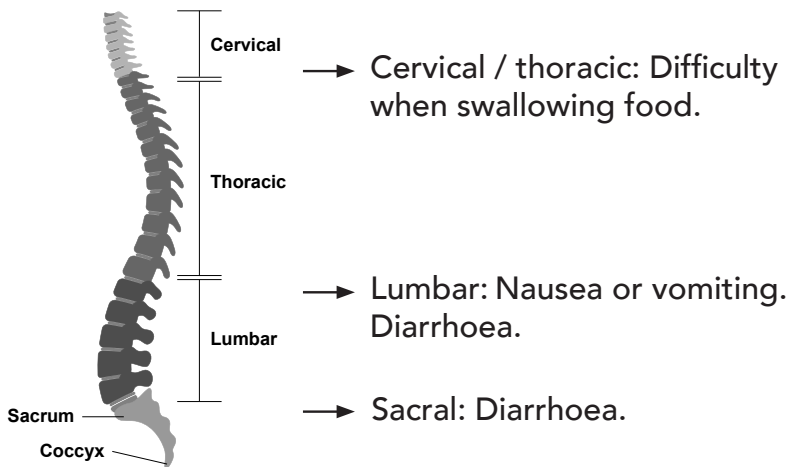
Who will look after me in the ward?

You will be assessed by various members of the healthcare team including Physiotherapists and Occupational Therapists. They will all work closely with you along with the nurses in the ward. They will ensure that your symptoms are managed and that you are as comfortable as possible. They will also advise if it is safe for you to move about or whether you may initially require bed rest. Please speak to them regarding pain control and any other symptoms.

You will be closely monitored while you are in hospital.

What are the early effects of radiotherapy treatment?

Each person is an individual and may experience various side effects. These side effects are often dependent on where your spinal cord compression is. As a guide some side effects that you may experience are:



- **Tiredness** - Nearly all patients having radiotherapy will feel tired. Take rest when you need it. The tiredness may last for several weeks after treatment finishes.
- **Pain** - Some people find that their pain improves within a few days of treatment. Others find that it takes several weeks to feel the benefits. It is not uncommon to notice an increase in pain soon after treatment. Continue to take any prescribed painkillers until you notice an improvement in your symptoms/pain. If necessary discuss this with your hospital doctor or GP.
- **Skin reaction** - The skin in the treated area may turn red and become itchy soon after treatment. We can give you a moisturiser to help with any dryness or itchiness. Please avoid using an electric blanket, hot water bottle or ice pack on the area.

Your oncology team may discuss referral to the hospital palliative care team for additional help with symptoms you may be experiencing.

What happens after my treatment ends?

Any symptoms that have developed as a result of your treatment will gradually improve.

If you are an inpatient during your treatment, you may remain in the ward for a short while after treatment finishes. You may also be transferred to another hospital, hospice or on occasions back home. This is assessed on an individual basis and any services you may need will be put in place.

Remember if you feel unwell after your treatment has finished please contact your GP or if out of hours, NHS 24. Please also see below for urgent symptoms, where contacting the Cancer Treatment Helpline may be more appropriate.

Where can I get help?

Information and support

All our 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:

Information and Support Radiographer

☎ 0141 301 7427

The Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre has a **Radiotherapy Advice Line** available for patients who have completed treatment. This is an answer phone service, available Monday - Friday. Please leave your name and contact number and a radiographer will call you back as soon as possible.

☎ 0141 301 7432

The Cancer Centre also has a **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 37.5C.
- 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.

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

The Macmillan Information & Support Centre is on Level 1 at the main entrance of the Beatson. They offer emotional support, information and signposting to services within and near to the Beatson and in your own local area. Open Monday to Friday 8.15am to 4.15pm. Please visit or phone on **☎ 0141 301 7390**.

Counselling and Clinical Psychology

Within the department we have a counselling and clinical psychology service. They can help with worries and difficulties you might be having before, during and 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.

- **Macmillan Benefits Team (within the Beatson)**

☎ 0141 301 7374

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

- **Wellbeing Centre** – Located on the 4th floor of the Beatson. Please feel free to visit this 'retreat' and use the available facilities. These include complementary therapies, podiatry service, a hair and beauty salon plus the opportunity to relax outside the hospital ward setting. The Wellbeing centre staff can also provide some of their facilities at your bedside. Please ask a member of staff to refer you. You or a family member can also contact them on ☎ 0141 301 7667.

- **Maggie's Gartnavel:** ☎ 0141 357 2269
Maggie's Lanarkshire, Monklands Hospital:
☎ 01236 771199
Maggie's Forth Valley: ☎ 01324 868069
Maggie's Centre provides a comprehensive cancer support programme for people and their families affected by cancer.
🌐 www.maggies.org
- **Cancer Support Scotland - The Calman Centre, Gartnavel Complex.** Freephone ☎ 0800 652 4531.
Provides emotional and practical support on a one-to-one basis and through community based groups.
Complementary therapies available.
🌐 www.cancersupportscotland.org
- **Beatson Cancer Centre** - if you want to find out more about our Centre please visit 🌐 www.beatson.scot.nhs.uk
- **NHS 24** ☎ 111

Care Opinion

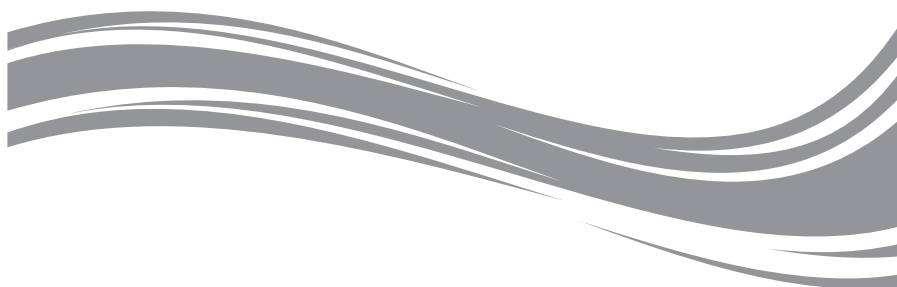
We welcome your comments and feedback about our service.

If you would like to give us feedback please go to:

🌐 www.careopinion.org.uk or telephone ☎ 0900 122 3135 or scan the QR code:



This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



Original leaflet written by L. Brown, H. Reid & M. Brown
Reviewed H. Reid & B. Clark August 2023
Leaflet QA approved by H. Reid August 2023