

PATIENT INFORMATION

After Radiotherapy for Head and Neck Cancer

What Happens Next ?

Name: _____

Date: _____

Given By: _____

Contact No: _____

After Radiotherapy for Head and Neck Cancer

This booklet has been produced to advise you of the potential short and long term effects of radiotherapy.

These side effects will vary depending on where your original cancer was and the number of radiotherapy treatments you have received.

Specific advice is available from the radiographers within the radiotherapy department and the Head and Neck Nurse Specialist.

These contact numbers are available on the back of this booklet.

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Skincare

While you were having radiotherapy, it was important to look after your skin and you will have been provided with some cream to moisturise the skin.

Now that radiotherapy is complete it is still important to keep the skin moisturised and you should continue using the cream regularly. The skin is probably very red at this time and it may begin to blister; this is normal. If it becomes very itchy, you may need a different cream or dressing to help with this.

It is worth speaking to the radiographers or your nurse specialist before using other skincare products you have used previously. Products containing Aloe Vera have been found to be particularly useful following radiotherapy.

It is important to protect your skin from the effects of the sun and high factor sun creams are recommended. It is a good idea to protect your skin from sun damage lifelong.

It is advisable for males not to wet shave for some weeks yet, as it may irritate the skin further. You may find that hair growth within the radiated area is minimal, but don't worry, hair growth may return- localised hair loss after high dose radiotherapy is common.

Any skin redness will be at its worst at approximately 10-14 days following radiotherapy; this gradually improves, and is usually healed within 2-4 weeks

If you have suffered a particularly bad reaction, your specialist nurse or the radiotherapy department staff may have arranged dressings for the area. If you have any concerns about this area please either contact your practice nurse via your General Practitioner, or speak to the Head and Neck Clinical Nurse Specialist for advice, contact details at the back of this leaflet.

Nutrition

It is very common for people who have had radiotherapy to their head and neck to experience significant problems with their eating and drinking. Very poor appetite, pain, nausea, thick secretions and difficulty swallowing can all make eating challenging. People often lose large amounts of muscle and consequently strength. Weight loss is common and a loss of desire to eat food is a problem many people face.

It can be daunting trying to start eating and drinking normal food again after treatment, particularly if you have been using a feeding tube.

Nutritional supplement drinks are an excellent source of energy, protein and vitamins and minerals. These can be used to support your intake whilst you recover, either alongside food or alone. Further supplies are available from your dietitian or GP. As your intake of food increases, you will need less and less nutritional supplement drinks, but most people have found it can take six to eight weeks for their intake of food to improve so they are not needed at all.

It is essential that you take enough nutrients during the recovery phase as this will speed up your healing. If you do not, you will lose muscle and become weaker. It is hard to rebuild this muscle once it has gone. Enough nutrition will also speed up the healing in your mouth and throat which may be sore, and your skin which may be red and broken.

You may well find that your taste buds have been affected, and everything is bland or has a metallic taste to it. People have also said that all they can taste is salty or sweet foods. This is normal, and usually starts to subside a few weeks after radiotherapy has finished but can take many months to recover fully. Keep trying new foods and flavours as some things will taste better than others.

Feeding tubes

If you have a feeding tube in your tummy you can expect to have it in place for a couple of months after treatment, but for some people it may be longer.

Feeding tubes in your nose (NG tubes) tend to come out a couple of weeks after treatment finishes as your oral intake improves.

It is important to continue to flush your feeding tube with water every day even if you haven't been using it. You may find you will still experience some days when you can't eat anything and feel you have gone backwards. This is very common and can be disheartening for people and their friends and families. Try and take each day as it comes and try as much as you can manage each day. Things will get easier and you will adapt and learn strategies to help you manage.

Steps will be taken to remove your feeding tube when you are managing a good diet, are maintaining your weight and you haven't needed to use your feeding tube for some time. Please contact your Head and Neck Nurse Specialist, Dietitian or Nutrition Nurse for advice about removal, when you have reached this point.

Eating

We encourage most people to continue to eat and drink as best they can during treatment, accepting that this can be very difficult. For people who have not been able to eat and drink towards the end of their treatment, we would expect them to start trying fluids by mouth again such as water, milk, luke warm drinks, hot chocolate, soup or easier to manage foods like custard, yoghurt, ice cream or similar. Try just a couple of teaspoons at first and gradually build on this as you feel able. You may find you eat better if you are hungry so try before you have a nutritional supplement drink or any feed through your tube. If you can't manage very much orally, you can always use your tube to top up nutritionally or with extra water.

Your dietitian will see you at appointments to support you with your nutrition but can be phoned for advice in-between appointments. The telephone number is on the back of this booklet.

Mouth care

Please continue to refer to the leaflet '*Information about nutrition and the teeth for patients receiving radiotherapy*'. While you were having radiotherapy, your specialist nurse would have checked your mouth on a weekly basis. Now that your radiotherapy is complete, particular attention should be paid to your mouth, especially if you had radiotherapy to that area.

General Mouth Care

If you wear dentures, you may find it is initially too painful to wear them and it may be several weeks before you are able to wear your dentures again. In some cases they may no longer fit, and if this is the case, arrangements will be made to have them altered at your 4 week follow up appointment.

This can naturally have a knock-on effect with your nutritional intake, and should be discussed with the Dietitian.

Using a baby toothbrush to clean your tongue can be useful, especially if it has become coated with a thrush infection. Thrush is a fungal infection, and is quite common following radiotherapy, and you will have been prescribed an anti-fungal preparation. This should be taken regularly as prescribed to prevent re-infection.

You may also have been prescribed mouthwashes whilst you were having radiotherapy. You will find it beneficial to continue with these for several weeks following radiotherapy.

If you have persistent mouth ulcers following radiotherapy, there are several preparations available to help, please ask the Head and Neck Nurse Specialist for advice. It is advisable that you visit your dentist once all treatments are completed. The Restorative Dental Team will advise you when this is necessary. If you receive radiotherapy treatment to any part of your mouth, it can take several months following radiotherapy to completely heal, so please be patient.

Dry Mouth

A dry mouth is a symptom experienced by a lot of people both during and after their radiotherapy. There are a variety of artificial saliva preparations that you can use to alleviate this symptom e.g. Oralieve Moisturising Mouth Gel and Biotene Oral Balance Gel or Biotene Moisturising Mouthwash, Saliva Orthana or Salivix Pastilles which are available on prescription. Another alternative are Xylimelts tablets, these are available to purchase in from a pharmacy. If you would like to try these different options, please contact the Head and Neck Nurse Specialist for advice.

An alternative is to purchase a small travel spray bottle from your local chemist, and fill with tap water, keeping it chilled in the refrigerator can also help. Using it to apply a fine spray to your mouth can be more beneficial than just drinking water.

A dry mouth is a persistent side effect, and it can take several months after completion of radiotherapy to subside. In some cases, it may never totally disappear, so you may go on to have a much dryer mouth than before you had radiotherapy. Ask your specialist nurse about acupuncture for a dry mouth after radiotherapy.

SPEECH & LANGUAGE THERAPY

Life Long Swallow Exercises

What you can do to eat, drink, swallow and heal after radiotherapy.

You will have met a speech and language therapist during your treatment, and you have been carrying out the swallowing exercises provided. These were aimed at keeping your swallow muscles working well while you have been undergoing treatment.

The aim of these exercises is to prevent the muscles that you use for swallowing from becoming stiff and not working sufficiently.

It is really important that you keep up the following exercises and ensure these become part of your daily routine. To make this routine a little more manageable, discontinue the combination of exercises you were provided at the start of your treatment and focus on these two exercises:

Tongue

The Masako Technique - swallow while keeping the tip of the tongue pinched lightly between your teeth/ lips (you may need a sip of water beforehand as your mouth will become dry). Repeat 10 times, at least twice per day.

Swallow

The 'Effortful Swallow' – have a glass of water, and when you swallow, really squeeze your throat muscles and swallow hard. Have 10 sips using the Effortful Swallow. When eating, you can also do this approximately every 5-6 mouthfuls of food or drink.

Ensure you are well hydrated; sip plenty of water throughout the day.

If you have any concerns regarding your swallowing please contact your speech and language therapist

Pain

You may have been prescribed some painkillers during your radiotherapy and you should continue to use these as recommended for as long as you need them. Pain and soreness resulting from radiotherapy may continue for up to 8 weeks following treatment. This pain and soreness may worsen in the short term i.e. in the first 10 to 14 days, but will improve as the weeks progress

It is important that you take the painkillers **regularly**, especially during the first two weeks after radiotherapy, but as your condition improves you can start to decrease the amount you are taking

It is very important that you ensure you have an adequate supply of painkillers at home, especially at weekends and bank holidays. If you require stronger painkillers or further supplies of your current medication, this can be arranged through your GP.

Follow up

In most cases the Oncologist will see you 1 week following your radiotherapy, then Head and Neck Nurse Specialist, Dietitian and Speech and Language Therapist will arrange to see you in their outpatient clinic 2 weeks following your radiotherapy.

You will be seen again by your oncologist 4 weeks after treatment finishes then in the Head and Neck Oncology clinic at about 8 weeks following completion of your radiotherapy.

As a result of the radiotherapy you may experience low energy levels. This feeling may last for a number of weeks after your radiotherapy is completed. To improve your energy levels it is recommended that you engage with regular activities e.g. walking, gardening, light exercise or anything else you enjoy.

If you experience any difficulties following completion of your radiotherapy, please contact either your GP or the Head and Neck Nurse Specialists for advice as soon as possible.

Contact details

Head and Neck Nurse Specialists

01803 655044

Radiotherapy Department

01803 654273

Dietitian

01803 654380

Nutrition Nurse Specialists

01803 654951

Speech and Language Therapists

01803 654949

For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.