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 Specialists.

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 aqueous 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 aqueous 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, please ask advice about using a hydrocortisone cream 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 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 usually returns to normal at 6-8 weeks following radiotherapy.

Any skin redness will be at its worst at approximately 10-14 days following radiotherapy; this gradually improves, and is usually healed within 4-8 weeks.

If you have suffered a particularly bad reaction, your specialist nurse or the radiotherapy department staff may have arranged for your practice to dress 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.

**Swallowing**
You will have seen the Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) for swallowing, speech or voice during your treatment. She will have given you exercises to keep the muscles needed for swallowing flexible, so you can continue to eat and drink.

Now that treatment is over, you should continue with these exercises. Your SLT will see you and advise how to keep your swallow working well in the future. If you have any concerns, contact your SLT (details at the back of this leaflet).
**Nutrition**

This area has been divided up into two sections, one for those of you who were able to maintain oral diet and one for those people who required a feeding tube.

**Oral Diet**

Your nutritional intake may have been severely affected by the radiotherapy. You will have seen the Dietitian whilst you were receiving treatment, who would have advised you about the diet. It is likely you are using nutritional supplements, which are available on prescription from your General Practitioner (GP). You will find that you will probably continue to use these supplements for some weeks after completion of your radiotherapy, either alone or alongside food you can manage.

As your dietary intake increases, you will require the supplements less and less, but most people have found it can take up to 6-8 weeks following radiotherapy before their swallowing and diet returns to normal, and for some people it may take longer.
It is important to maintain an adequate nutritional intake following radiotherapy, as your body goes through the healing process.

You may well find that your taste buds have been affected, and everything is bland or has a metallic taste to it. This is normal, and usually starts to subside between 2-4 weeks following completion of radiotherapy.

It is important to maintain your weight at this stage and not to lose further weight. Some people can lose a lot of weight during their radiotherapy treatment, and it may be some months before you are able to regain some of this lost weight.

If you have any concerns regarding your dietary intake please seek the advice of the Dietitian, whose contact details are at the back of this booklet.
Tube feeding

If you have needed a feeding tube prior to or during radiotherapy, you can expect to have your tube in place for up to 2-3 months after the completion of radiotherapy; for some people it may be longer.

When to start trying an oral diet varies a lot, but most people are able to try some fluids approximately 2-3 weeks following radiotherapy. If you are still unable to swallow at this stage, do not despair, just try again and it will get easier.

Once you are able to manage oral fluids, gradually try a soft diet, i.e. ice cream, custard, yoghurt or something similar. Try just a couple of teaspoons at first, and gradually build on this. You may find you are more likely to eat if you are feeling hungry, so try something to eat before administering a feed via your tube.

If you can’t manage very much orally, you can always use your tube to top up nutritionally.
It is important to continue to flush your feeding tube with water on a daily basis even if you haven’t been using it for a while. You may find you will still experience some days when you can’t eat anything, and feel you are back where you started from. This is not the case, and you should expect the odd setback, but look afresh to the following day, when things will improve.

Steps will be taken to remove your feeding tube when you are managing a good oral nutritional diet, and you haven’t needed to use your feeding tube for some weeks. Please contact your Head and Neck Nurse Specialist, Dietitian or Nutrition Nurse for advice about removal, when you have reached this point.
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, usually Fluconazole. This should be taken regularly, and used for 2 weeks to clear the infection.

You may also have been prescribed special 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. You may have tried a variety of preparations to alleviate this symptom e.g. Oralbalance Gel and Biotene mouthwash. If you haven’t tried these, please contact the Head and Neck Nurse Specialist for advice.

Artificial saliva preparations e.g. Saliva Orthana, are also available. 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.
Pain

You will have been prescribed some painkillers on finishing your radiotherapy. 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 Head and Neck Nurse Specialist, Speech and language therapist and Dietitian will arrange to see you in their outpatient clinic 1 week and 2 weeks following your radiotherapy.

You will be seen in the Head and Neck Oncology clinic at about 4 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. Until your energy levels improve it is recommended that you avoid strenuous activities that may tire you and do only what you feel is comfortable, however daily activity is highly recommended.
Notes
If you experience any difficulties during this time following completion of your radiotherapy, please contact either your GP or the Head and Neck Nurse Specialist for advice as soon as possible.

**Contact details**

**Head and Neck Nurse Specialists**
Julie Hewett/Fahida Manby
📞 (01803) 655044

**Radiotherapy Department**
📞 (01803) 654273

**Dietitian**
Deborah Howland
📞 (01803) 654383

**Nutrition Nurse Specialists**
Jane Gagg & Sarah Smith
📞 (01803) 654951

**Speech and Language Therapy Department**
Daphne Carpenter
📞 (01803) 654949