



**Royal Berkshire**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# **Short course radiotherapy for brain metastases**

Information for patients beginning  
radiotherapy treatment

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**In the clinic today, you and your doctor have decided that you will have radiotherapy treatment to your brain for your cancer. This booklet discusses what happens next – what you can expect during and after your treatment and some general advice and information. You will be given time to discuss any concerns with the radiographer (a person trained to give radiotherapy) at your planning appointment.**

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## **Brain metastases and driving**

Some people may have seizures because of their brain metastases. Once you have been diagnosed with brain metastases **you must not drive** and you **must inform the DVLA of your diagnosis**.

The DVLA can be contacted by telephone on 0300 123 0883.

Full details and advice are also available on the DVLA website **[www.gov.uk/driving-medical-conditions](http://www.gov.uk/driving-medical-conditions)**

Some patients may notice mild seizures that last a few seconds or minutes. For example, facial twitching, arm/leg twitching, staring into space or word finding difficulty. If this happens, please contact your GP for advice and then notify your nurse specialist. **This is very important.**

If you suffer from seizures, your oncologist or GP will prescribe you anti-seizure medication.

## **Planning treatment**

You will be contacted by telephone to arrange an appointment for the planning of your radiotherapy treatment. Your treatment will then be scheduled to start approximately 2-10 days after that.

If you have not been called by the Radiotherapy Planning Department by a week after today's appointment, then you can

contact us on: Tel: 0118 322 7872, or email:

**[radiotherapy.planning@nhs.net](mailto:radiotherapy.planning@nhs.net)**

(Monday-Friday 8.30am-9.30am, 3.30pm-4.30pm).

If you have any problems with travel or appointment times please mention these when you are contacted about your planning scan appointment and we will do our best to help you. Please allow an hour for this planning appointment.

- Please let us know if you have a pacemaker or other implanted cardiac device, as radiotherapy can affect some types of cardiac devices.

## **What are the benefits of radiotherapy?**

The benefits of radiotherapy are due to its effect against cancer in the area being treated. Radiotherapy uses high energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. Our bodies are made up of different cells, and all cells have the capacity to divide. If radiation hits a cell that is dividing, it will be damaged. Unlike normal cells, cancer cells are much less able to repair the damage so more of them will be destroyed.

## **Radiotherapy for brain metastases**

You oncologist will prescribe you a number of treatments, which will be given daily or on a less frequent basis.

## **Pregnancy**

Patients with child-bearing capacity must not be pregnant or become pregnant at any time during a course of radiotherapy as radiation can be harmful to the unborn child. It is important to let the radiographers know if you have missed a period or suspect that you may be pregnant, before you are exposed to any radiation.

Patients with child-bearing capacity will be asked to confirm their pregnancy status prior to planning the radiotherapy and again on the first day of radiotherapy treatment.

This applies to all those with child-bearing capacity between the ages of 10-56 years and is a legal requirement.

## **Patient identification**

The hospital has a policy to ensure the correct patient is identified for their scan or treatment each time they attend an appointment. This will be done by our staff asking you to confirm your full name, your date of birth and the first line of your address. You may be asked this by different staff members, so please bear with us, but we take great care to ensure the correct patient identification checks are undertaken.

## **Your planning appointment**

As part of your planning appointment, your doctor may request that you have a mask or shell made. If this is the case, then your planning appointment will be made up of two stages; mask making, then a CT scan.

## **Mask making appointment:**

It's very important that you keep still during the radiotherapy and to help with this we make a mask that helps keep you in place for your radiotherapy planning and treatment. We also use the mask to put markings on to help plan the treatment.

At your planning appointment you will meet our specialist mask making team who will explain what is going to happen and answer any of your questions. They will then get you to lie down on the couch on your back and begin making your mask.

The mask begins as a flat piece of plastic with lots of holes in it. This is placed in warm water and stretched over the head and face. It then cools and sets into a personalised mask with plenty of air holes. This takes about 8 minutes.

## CT scan

Before the scan starts, one of the radiographers will explain what is going to happen and answer any of your questions.

You will lie on the CT bed wearing your mask. The radiographers will draw some pen marks on the outside of your mask and then place some markers on the mask which will show up on the scan. The radiographers will then leave the room to start the scan. During the scan you will move through the scanner, however you will not see or feel anything. You can breathe normally throughout the scan. The scan will take approximately two minutes. It will not hurt but it is very important that you stay very still during the scan.

The radiographers are watching you throughout the whole procedure so if you did need them you only need to raise a hand and they can come straight in.

After your CT scan you will be given the date and time for your treatment appointment. This will be approximately 2-10 days after your CT scan. This allows us time to create a plan for your treatment.



You will also be shown where to report for your first treatment appointment.

## **Your first radiotherapy treatment**

On your first treatment you will have a chat with one of the team of radiographers who will be treating you. They will:

- Check your details.
- Give you a list of appointment times.
- Discuss the treatment procedure.
- Outline the potential side effects.
- Tell you which day your doctor will see you during the treatment.
- Answer any questions you may have.

The Berkshire Cancer Centre is a training centre, so you may meet radiography students who may be involved with the delivery of your treatment under close supervision.

## **What happens during treatment?**

Radiographers operate the radiotherapy machines to give you the precise treatment prescribed by the doctor. On each treatment visit they will ask you how you are feeling and ensure that you are coping well as the treatment progresses. The radiographer will help you on to the treatment bed, put your immobilisation device on you and adjust the bed and the machine to the exact positions that are needed. He or she will ask you to remove any clothing or jewellery including earrings that are in the area being treated. During the treatment you need to keep as still as possible.

You will have your treatment in exactly the same position as when it was planned, but using a different machine. You will be in the treatment room about 10 minutes altogether (slightly longer for your first appointment) but the treatment itself will only take a few minutes. You will not feel any discomfort.

We will give you the date and time of your first treatment visit when you attend for your planning visit.

Staff on the radiotherapy treatment machine will then give you times for your other visits on a weekly basis.

You will sometimes be treated on different treatment machines. This is due to the machines occasionally needing to be serviced. All the machines give the same treatment.

Once treatment has started, we aim to continue it without any breaks or days off, apart from the weekends. However, we know that circumstances do sometimes arise where either you cannot come for treatment or for technical reasons e.g. a machine breakdown, when we might not be able to deliver to the original schedule. If any treatments are missed, the radiographers will discuss with you how we will compensate for this. This will not change the effectiveness of treatment and in the event of repeated delays you will be given more information. If there are any short notice changes of appointments times we ask for your understanding and patience while the staff works hard to rearrange your appointment.

## **After treatment**

Radiotherapy does not make you radioactive and it is perfectly safe for you to be with other people, including children, after your treatment. You may experience some symptoms and side effects. These are listed over the page.

If you would like to keep your mask at the end of the treatment just let the radiographers know on your last day.

## **Use of steroids with your radiotherapy**

Brain metastases or secondary deposits cause inflammation and swelling around those deposits. The oncologist will prescribe steroids, usually high dose, at the point of diagnosis, to be continued during radiotherapy and then the dose gradually reduced once radiotherapy treatment has finished.

Your oncologist will discuss a plan and schedule for steroids with you before completion of radiotherapy.

## **Benefits of steroids**

Will reduce inflammation and swelling around the brain metastases which will help to reduce headaches.

Steroids can make you feel better in general.

## **Possible side effects of steroids**

Swelling of the face.

- Increase in blood sugar.
- Gastric irritation.
- Weakness in the legs.
- Increased appetite.

## **Possible side effects of radiotherapy**

Side effects and their intensity will vary from patient to patient – everyone is different and reacts differently to treatment. It is important you keep the radiographers informed of any side effects that you experience.

Most side effects may continue 2-3 weeks after your treatment is completed. Not everyone will experience all of the side-effects listed here. If you do experience any of the following side-effects do not worry, they are a normal reaction to treatment and are temporary. Please inform staff of how you are feeling so that they can advise and treat you.

- **Fatigue (chronic tiredness):** Radiotherapy can make you feel very tired. The tiredness may start during your treatment and continue for a number of weeks or months after treatment. You should allow extra time for a rest, for example an afternoon nap. If possible spread your chores out over the week. There is



no reason why you shouldn't continue with your usual daily activities just remember to take a rest in between.

- **Headaches:** Radiotherapy may cause some swelling around the tumour at first, this can make your symptoms a little worse and some patients can experience headaches, and nausea. A couple of weeks after treatment you should notice that your symptoms will start to improve. If you find that you are in pain, ask the radiographers for support. They will arrange for you to see a health care professional who may prescribe some medication to help.
- **Hair loss:** You will lose your hair in the area that is being treated. Hair should begin to grow back a few months after the treatment is over. Hair re-growth may be a little patchy, particularly when it first starts to re-grow. Sometimes, hair grows back with a slightly different colour and texture and perhaps not as thickly as before. In the meantime, hats, wigs or hairpieces are some practical suggestions for coping with hair loss. Please ask a member of staff to discuss this with you, as there is a wig service available.  
**Washing your hair:** Once radiotherapy has started you may wash your hair very gently with lukewarm water. Baby shampoo may be used. Dry the hair and scalp very gently using a soft towel. Do not rub your head or use a hair dryer.
- **Sickness:** The treatment may make you feel nauseous or cause vomiting. To prevent this, the oncologist will prescribe an anti-sickness tablet to alleviate this. If you continue to feel nauseous, please let the radiographers, your nurse or consultant know so we can suggest another anti-sickness tablet to try.

The oncologist will see you to manage your symptoms and make necessary medication changes accordingly.

- **Food aversion caused by symptoms:** It is not unusual during your treatment to experience nausea that can result in food aversion. Eating regular small meals and drinking plenty of fluids will help to reduce nausea.

Fizzy drinks are particularly helpful, as are drinks and biscuits containing ginger. If the smell of food is causing nausea, try eating cold foods.

- **Skin reaction:** For about two weeks after your radiotherapy treatment your scalp may become dry, itchy, red and tender. It is advisable to protect your head from both the sun and cold weather. You may want to wear a hat. You will find it more comfortable to have a hat made of natural fibres e.g. cotton or silk, while you are having the treatment.

## Other side effects

Some patients may notice short-term memory loss.

## Contact details

Radiotherapy Clinic: 0118 322 7890 (9am-5pm)

email: [radiotherapy.planning@nhs.net](mailto:radiotherapy.planning@nhs.net)

Your Oncology Nurse Specialist: 0118 322 \_\_\_\_\_

Consultant Palliative Radiographer 07385 398 095

Berkshire Cancer Centre: 0118 322 7888 (9am-5pm)

Macmillan Cancer Support: 0808 808 0000

# Notes

To find out more about our Trust visit [www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk)

**Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.**

BCC Radiotherapy Department.

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