

# Palliative radiotherapy to the oesophagus

Information for patients



## Edinburgh Cancer Centre

Your cancer doctor has advised you to have a course of radiotherapy to your oesophagus to help with your symptoms. This leaflet explains what the treatment involves.

### Radiotherapy to the oesophagus

Cancer can start to grow in the Oesophagus (food pipe) at any part along its length. We can use palliative radiotherapy to help with symptoms associated with this.

### What will radiotherapy do?

The aim of radiotherapy is to improve and/or relieve symptoms such as difficulty swallowing and bleeding, hopefully improving your oral intake as a result.

### What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is the use of high energy X-Rays to destroy cancer cells, while doing as little harm as possible to the surrounding normal cells. The treatment itself is painless and you will not see or feel anything whilst the treatment is being delivered. Your radiotherapy may be given in 1, 5 or 10 doses. The Doctor overseeing your radiotherapy will discuss with you how many treatments are most appropriate for you.

### What can I do to prepare for my appointment?

You may be in the department for up to 2 hours, so:

- Wear loose, comfortable clothing
- Bring any regular medications including painkillers
- Bring a snack or money for the café.

## What happens in the radiotherapy department?

### Treatment planning

You will have a planning CT (Computerised Tomography) scan on a CT scanner. You will be asked to lie still on the couch, breathing normally, with your arms above your head. A scan will be done and the radiographers and your doctor will take measurements to plan your treatment accurately. Pen marks will be drawn onto the skin to indicate the area to be treated.

If you are having more than one treatment, we will ask your permission to make a small, permanent mark. This involves a pin prick. If your cancer sits higher within the oesophagus, you may need a mask of your head and shoulders – this allows us to make sure your position on the treatment couch is the same every day, whilst also allowing the radiographers to draw marks on it to indicate the area to be treated. Whether you need a mask or not will be discussed with you when discussing radiotherapy.

The process of making a mask takes around 20 minutes. A plastic sheet is warmed in a water bath and placed over your face/shoulders. It hardens to fit the shape of you and will be used daily when you come in for treatment.

Depending on the number of treatments your Doctor prescribes for you, you may start treatment that day or in the following week(s). This will be made clear to you before arriving.

### Treatment delivery

Your treatment will be delivered on a machine called a “Linear Accelerator” (see photo). For the treatment, you will be asked to lie on the treatment couch in the same position you were in for the planning scan. The radiographers will then use a laser system and the marks on your body (or mask, if applicable) that were previously made at the planning scan in order to line you up in the correct position for treatment. The radiographers will leave the room while the radiotherapy is being delivered, but they can see you on CCTV. You will be asked to lie still while the treatment machine moves around you and delivers the treatment. This will take a few minutes.



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## What are the side-effects of radiotherapy?

- Radiotherapy may cause tiredness that can last for several weeks after treatment
- Following treatment, the skin overlying the treated area can become inflamed or itchy. Wash with simple, non-perfumed soap. Staff can advise you on moisturisers.
- You may also experience nausea, for which we can provide anti-sickness tablets
- Your swallowing may temporarily worsen before it improves due to the inflammation caused by the radiotherapy. If it worsens to such an extent that you are unable to eat and drink, we may need to pass a feeding tube through the nose to your stomach to ensure you receive adequate nutrition.
- You may experience discomfort and/or pain on swallowing, which may need some medication to help soothe.
- You may also experience a cough or a temporary deterioration in breathing as a consequence of the lungs receiving some of the radiotherapy dose due to their proximity to the oesophagus.
- Please report any change in symptoms when you attend for treatment.
- Radiotherapy does not make you radioactive so there is no need to restrict contact with children or pregnant women.

## What happens next?

It may be several weeks before you feel the full effect of the radiotherapy, so it is important to continue with any medication that has been prescribed until your doctor gives you further instructions. Most patients are followed up by the Cancer Nurse Specialists 2 weeks after the end of treatment by phone, then seen in clinic approximately 4 weeks after that to assess the response. In the meantime you should report any concerns about your symptoms to your GP, Cancer Nurse Specialist or the Cancer Treatment Line (see number below).

## Cancer Treatment Helpline

If you have any problems during your treatment, or up to 6 weeks after, you can call the Cancer Treatment Helpline on **0800 917 7711** when you need out of hours help and advice.

