

Radical Radiotherapy for Prostate Cancer



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Radiotherapy is the use of high-energy radiation beams to destroy cancer cells. It is an effective form of treatment for prostate cancer as it can reduce the likelihood of the cancer returning. The treatment is given as an out-patient procedure at Royal Shrewsbury hospital for approximately 6- 8 weeks. It is unlikely to cause any side effects which would prevent patients from driving home.

Hormonal therapy

Hormonal treatment is sometimes used together with radiation treatment for prostate cancer to enhance the effect of radiation. If that is the case, the consultant oncologist might not start radiation treatment until 3 – 6 months after the beginning of hormone treatment. Hormone treatment includes regular injections every 1 – 3 months at your local GP surgery. Your specialist may ask you to take the hormone tablet orally for two weeks before and after first hormone injection. After one month of taking hormone tablets, tablets can be stopped but you need to continue with the injections. The oncologist will determine the total duration of hormone therapy after radiation treatment.

The side effects of hormone therapy include tiredness, reduced or loss of desire to have sex, hot flushes, night sweat, breast tenderness and breast enlargement. It can also affect your body shape, blood sugar control and bone health. Usually the side effects are not severe. However if you have severe symptoms you must let your doctor know so that treatment is adjusted.

What happens next?

You will be seen by a consultant oncologist to counsel you for radiation therapy. If you are suitable for radiotherapy, pre-treatment radiographers will contact you with an appointment to attend for a radiotherapy planning CT scan. This session can take up to 45 – 60 minutes and involves a CT scan of your pelvis. Radiographers will permanently mark your skin with tattoo marks so that you can be positioned accurately every day during the radiotherapy treatment. After the planning session you will be given a date for your first radiotherapy treatment.

Radiotherapy treatment takes place every day except Saturdays and Sundays for approximately 4 - 8 weeks (a total of around 37 treatments). It takes 10 – 15 minutes for each session. Most of the time in treatment room is taken to position you correctly. It is important to keep as still as possible during the treatment session. You will not feel anything but you may hear the machine buzz as it delivers a portion of the dose. The treatment dose is delivered from a number of positions – the machine delivers each portion then automatically moves around to the next position until all the planned treatment has been delivered.

Side effects of radiotherapy

Side effects may occur as radiation beam will also affect healthy cells in the body as well as the tumour cells. Side effects are categorised as **EARLY** (occurs in the latter half of treatment and may last for 6 -10 weeks) and **LATE** (occurs 1-5 years after finishing the treatment).

Early side effects

1. Tiredness

In the latter half of your treatment course, you might feel more tired than usual. Ensuring that you have adequate rest, drink plenty of fluid (reducing your caffeine intake) and eating a healthy balanced meal can help this.

2. Skin reaction

Although the skin reaction usually occurs in the latter half of the treatment course, we advise you to take care of your skin from the first day of treatment. This include using simple soap, taking showers rather than baths and using an aqueous cream to moisturise the skin. Swimming should be avoided during the treatment. There is an increased risk of sunburn in treatment area and an increased sensitivity for up to 2 years.

3. Urinary symptoms

Patients may notice an increased need to empty their bladder both during the day and at night. Along with this they may notice a reduction in the flow of urine and sometimes a burning sensation when passing urine. To minimise these effects it is important to drink plenty of fluid to reduce the concentration of the urine. If symptoms worsen please discuss with the radiographers who can advise you on methods to reduce the discomfort.

4. Bowel symptoms

Some patients may experience abdominal cramps or diarrhoea due to radiotherapy. Any change in bowel habits or pain when opening bowels should be discussed as soon as possible with the radiographers who will be able to offer advice.

5. Rectal Symptoms

A small part of the rectum is also likely to be included within the treatment area and this may result in patients experiencing a small degree of inflammation called "proctitis". This will give you severe urge to open the bowels several times even when the rectum is empty.

Towards the end of the treatment you will also notice blood and mucous in stools. This is perfectly normal treatment reaction which might require treatment with pain relief and steroid medication. If you already have haemorrhoids (piles) the radiotherapy might worsen the symptoms.

Late side effects

These side effects occur months or years after finishing radiotherapy treatment. Less than 5 – 10% of patients will experience serious late side effects.

1. Dryness and darkening of skin

2. Urinary symptoms

In a small number of patients urinary symptoms (difficulty in passing urine, dribbling and inability to hold urine) may not settle. There is a risk of developing a narrowing (scarring) of water pipe after radiotherapy and may need a surgical treatment.

3. Chronic proctitis

Persistent mucous and blood discharge may persist in a small number of patients after radiotherapy. Other problems include bowel adhesions, persistent looseness of the stools, abdominal pain, chronic discomfort when opening the bowels and blockage of the bowels.

4. Erectile dysfunction

The risk can be as high as 40-50%. If you are receiving hormone treatment, you might also lose libido (desire to have sex).

5. Rectal fistula

There is a very small risk of developing a fistula (small hole) between the rectum and the bladder.

Contact details for more information

Please do not hesitate to contact us for any additional information on 01743 261126.

Other Sources of Information

National Contact Address for

- **NHS Direct**

A nurse-led advice service run by the NHS for patients with questions about diagnosis and treatment of common conditions.

Telephone: 0845 4647

Website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

- **Equip**

A West Midlands NHS website which signposts patients to quality health information and provides local information about support groups and contacts.

Website: www.equip.nhs.uk

- **Patient UK**

Provides leaflets on health and disease translated into 11 other languages as well as links to national support/self help groups and a directory of UK health websites.

Website: www.patient.co.uk

Further information is available from;

- **Patient Advise and Liaison Service (PALS)**

PALS will act on your behalf when handling patient and family concerns, they can also help you get support from other local or national agencies. PALS, is a confidential service.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Tel: 0800 783 0057 or 01743 261691

Princess Royal Hospital, Tel: 01952 282888

Your Information

Information about you and your healthcare is held by the NHS. You can find out more about the information we hold and how it is used in the leaflet called: **Your Information**, which is available from PALS (contact details above).

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