

# Short Course, Pre-Operative Radiotherapy for Bowel Cancer

**Pan Birmingham  
Cancer Network**

Patient Information 

## **Introduction**

This leaflet tells you about short course, pre-operative radiotherapy for the treatment of bowel cancer. It explains what is involved, and some of the common complications that you need to be aware of. It is not meant to replace discussion between you and your surgeon, but as a guide to be used in connection to what is discussed.

## **What is radiotherapy?**

Radiotherapy treatment involves the use of exact and carefully measured doses of radiation and aims to destroy cancer cells. Although healthy cells are also damaged during treatment, they usually repair themselves more effectively. **You will be given detailed written information about radiotherapy prior to your treatment.**

## **What are the benefits of pre-operative radiotherapy treatment?**

A short course of pre-operative radiotherapy has been recommended for you. The aim of this treatment is to kill cancer cells that may be growing into the tissues around the cancer. By having radiotherapy the risk of the cancer coming back is reduced.

## **What does the treatment involve?**

### **Planning**

Your radiotherapy needs to be carefully planned. Before your treatment starts, you will have a Computed Tomography (CT) scan and a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scan.

When you attend for a planning session, a CT scan will be used to identify your rectal cancer and help the radiologist to locate and mark its position. A small piece of metal is taped over your anus, to help mark its position on the CT scan. CT uses special X-ray equipment to obtain many images from different angles. Then a specially designed computer programme joins them together to show detailed pictures of the inside of the body.

If you haven't had an MRI scan at this point, an appointment will be arranged for you. MRI is a way of examining the body without the use of X-rays. It uses a strong magnetic field and an advanced computer system to provide clear and detailed pictures of the inside of the body.

You will be asked to lie on your front for much of this planning session, with

a full bladder. The whole procedure takes around an hour.

Small, painless tattoos will be placed on your skin. These tiny permanent marks are used by the radiographers to set up the treatment area correctly and help to ensure you receive treatment to the same area on subsequent visits.

You can also expect to have a rectal and/or vaginal examination.

You may be given a contrast to drink to help your bowel to show up on the scan.

### **Radiotherapy treatment**

Treatment is usually given as an outpatient every day Monday to Friday for 1 week; each treatment lasts for around 10 minutes. You will generally have your operation to remove your cancer within 1 week of finishing your radiotherapy.

Travelling can be difficult for some patients, particularly if you live some distance away. The hospital does have accommodation which patients can use free of charge. If this is something you feel you need, please mention this to either the specialist nurse or the doctor looking after you.

### **What are the early and temporary side effects of radiotherapy treatment?**

You will not feel anything during the treatment and acute side effects are unlikely, however you may develop:

- Tiredness and fatigue
- Diarrhoea
- Soreness or pain when passing water (cystitis)
- Sore skin around your bottom
- An increase in rectal loss (mucus from your back passage)
- Slower healing of pelvic wound.

## **What are the possible long term or permanent side effects of radiotherapy treatment?**

The possible long term or permanent side effects of radiotherapy include:

- Bowel damage / dysfunction causing narrowing or scarring, blockage, ulceration, chronic diarrhoea or poor absorption of food
- Bladder damage causing you to pass water more frequently or you may experience pain or bladder spasms
- In men, fertility will be lowered, and may be lost completely, due to reduced sperm counts and loss of erection or sexual dysfunction. If you are male and still wish to have children, you will be asked if you want to bank your sperm, prior to treatment. Fertility will be discussed with you in detail before your treatment begins.
- In women, damage to your ovaries leading to early menopause and subsequent infertility. Fertility will be discussed with you in detail before your treatment begins.
- In women, vaginal dryness and narrowing leading to sexual dysfunction. There are treatments available for this.

You will be advised to eat a low fibre diet and information on this will be given to you when you attend for radiotherapy.

If you are sexually active, you will be advised to use contraception for the duration of your treatment.

## **What are the alternatives to pre-operative radiotherapy treatment?**

The aim of this treatment is to reduce the risk of your cancer returning. There are no alternative methods of ensuring this.

## **Glossary of medical terms used in this information:**

**Chemotherapy** — The treatment of cancer with drugs.

**CT Scan** — Computed Tomography (CT) uses special X-ray equipment to obtain many images from different angles. Then a specially designed computer programme joins them together to show detailed pictures of the inside of the body.

**MRI Scan** — Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) is a way of examining the body without the use of X-rays. It uses a strong magnetic field and an advanced computer system to provide clear and detailed pictures of the inside of the body.

**Radiographer** — A professional trained to operate equipment concerned with the production and detection of radiation. Radiographers work with Radiologists to aid diagnosis and treatment.

**Radiotherapy** — X-ray treatment that uses high energy rays to damage or kill cancer cells.

**Rectum / Rectal** — The last section of the digestive tract, extending from the colon to the anus, in which faeces is stored for elimination from the body.

**Oncology** — The study and treatment of cancer.

### **Local sources of further information**

You can visit any of the health/cancer information centres listed below:

#### **Birmingham Women's Healthcare NHS Trust**

Health Information Centre

Birmingham Women's Healthcare NHS Trust

Metchley Park Road

Edgbaston

Birmingham

B15 2TG

Telephone: 0121 627 2608

#### **Good Hope Hospital NHS Trust**

Cancer Information and Support Centre

Good Hope Hospital NHS Trust

Rectory Road

Sutton Coldfield

B75 7RR

Telephone: 0121 378 6641

#### **Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust**

Patient Information Centre

Birmingham Heartlands Hospital

Bordesley Green East

Birmingham

B9 5SS

Telephone: 0121 424 2280

Email: [healthinfo.centre@heartofengland.nhs.uk](mailto:healthinfo.centre@heartofengland.nhs.uk)

**Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust**

The Courtyard Centre  
Sandwell General Hospital (Main Reception)  
Lyndon  
West Bromwich  
B71 4HJ  
Telephone: 0121 507 3792  
Fax: 0121 507 3816

The Cancer Information Service  
Birmingham Treatment Centre  
City Hospital  
Dudley Road  
Birmingham  
B18 7QH  
Telephone: 0121 507 3792 Fax: 0121 507 3816

**University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust**

The Patrick Room  
Cancer Centre  
University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust  
Queen Elizabeth Hospital  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham  
B15 2TH  
Telephone: 0121 697 8417

**Walsall Primary Care Trust**

Cancer Information & Support Services  
Challenge Building  
Hatherton Street  
Walsall  
Freephone: 0800 783 9050

For details of local cancer support groups and organisations, please ask your colorectal nurse.

## **Cancerbackup - Information in your language**

Cancerbackup is the UK's largest cancer information charity, providing information, support and practical advice on all cancers, treatments and supportive issues: <http://www.cancerbackup.org.uk>

Cancerbackup's freephone helpline can now give information and support to people affected by cancer in more than 100 languages. People whose first language is not English can contact the specialist cancer information nurses on freephone **0808 800 1234**, who will then link in a relevant interpreter. There are also 12 additional freephone lines specifically for speakers of the most common community languages. Lines are open Monday to Friday 9am-8pm.

(Source: <http://www.cancerbackup.org.uk>)

### **Freephone numbers:**

**Arabic:** 0808 800 0130

**Bengali:** 0808 800 0131

**Cantonese:** 0808 800 0132

**English:** 0808 800 1234

**French:** 0808 800 0133

**Greek:** 0808 800 0134

**Gujarati:** 0808 800 0135

**Hindi:** 0808 800 0136

**Polish:** 0808 800 0137

**Punjabi:** 0808 800 0138

**Turkish:** 0808 800 0139

**Urdu:** 0808 800 0140

**Vietnamese:** 0808 800 0141

## **About this information**

This guide is provided for general information only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Every effort is taken to ensure that this information is accurate and consistent with current knowledge and practice at the time of publication.

We are constantly striving to improve the quality of our information. If you have a suggestion about how this information can be improved, please contact us via our website:

<http://www.birminghamcancer.nhs.uk>

This information was produced by Pan Birmingham Cancer Network and was written by Consultant Surgeons, Clinical Nurse Specialists, Allied Health Professionals, and Patients and Carers from the following Trusts:

Good Hope Hospital Trust  
Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust  
Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust  
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Walsall Hospitals NHS Trust

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