





You may be given hormone therapy for three to six months before you begin radiotherapy. This shrinks the prostate and makes the cancer easier to treat. You may also have further hormone therapy throughout your course of radiotherapy. Some men who are at a higher risk of their cancer spreading will continue to have hormone therapy for at least two years after radiotherapy. You can read more about hormone therapy in our Tool Kit fact sheet, **Hormone therapy**.

Before starting radiotherapy you will be invited to a planning session. You may have more than one session. You will have a CT (computerised tomography) scan to find the exact location, size and shape of your prostate. This is to make sure the treatment is accurate and that the surrounding areas do not receive more radiation than is necessary.

You will then be given three small permanent marks on your lower body. You will barely be able to see them but they help the staff to put you in the right position on the radiotherapy machine each time you are treated.

Some treatment centres may implant a small number of gold seeds, called fiducial markers, into the prostate. These are about the size of a grain of rice. They show up on scans and help the specialist team to locate the prostate during treatment.

Most treatment centres will give you information about how full or empty your bladder and bowel should be. This helps the specialist team to make sure they are treating the right area each time.

Tell your specialist team about any medication you are taking before you start treatment.

## Treatment

You will be treated at your hospital radiotherapy unit during the day and you will not have to stay overnight. You will have one treatment (known as a fraction) every day from Monday to Friday, with a rest over the weekend to help your normal cells recover. Treatment normally lasts between seven and eight weeks. Some hospitals may offer a shorter course of about four weeks, with

higher doses per session but a slightly lower total dose.

At the beginning of each treatment, a member of staff will help you into the right position on the radiotherapy machine using the marks on your lower body as a guide. It can take a little while but it is important to get it right. The staff then leave the room. They will be able to see and hear you at all times.

The treatment then starts and the machine moves around your body. It does not touch you and you should not feel anything. You will need to keep still but the treatment itself only lasts a few minutes. The whole session lasts about 10-20 minutes, including the time taken to position you on the machine.

You will have regular scans or X-ray images taken during the course of your treatment to check that the radiotherapy is given to the correct area. The number and type of images taken will vary between treatment centres. Some centres use a method called image guided radiotherapy (IGRT), where the position of the prostate is checked just before treatment. Ask your specialist team about what sort of scans you will have.

It is perfectly safe for you to be around other people, including children, during your course of radiotherapy. You will not give off any of the radiation you have been given.

Treatment affects men differently but many are able to continue with normal activities. Many men continue to work while having radiotherapy but some men find that they need time to rest during treatment. If you have any questions about your treatment, speak to your specialist team. They can give you advice on coping with any side effects. You can also speak to one of our specialist nurses by calling our confidential Helpline on 0800 074 8383.

## Salvage radiotherapy

If you are having radiotherapy after surgery because your PSA level has started to rise, your specialist team will treat the area where the prostate gland was removed from (the prostate bed). This is called salvage or second

line radiotherapy. The treatment is carried out in the same way, although you may be given a lower dose of radiotherapy. You may also be given hormone therapy at the same time.

## What happens afterwards?

Your PSA level will be checked six to twelve weeks after your treatment has finished. It will then be checked at least every six months for two years and after that at least once a year. This is to monitor how well the radiotherapy has worked. You will also be asked about any side effects that you may have. Follow up will vary between different centres and your specialist team will tell you how often your PSA level will be tested.

If your treatment has been successful your PSA level should drop. However, how quickly this happens, and how low the PSA level falls, will depend on whether you had hormone therapy alongside radiotherapy. If you had radiotherapy on its own, it may take 18 months to two years for your PSA level to fall to its lowest level. If you had hormone therapy as well, your PSA level may fall more quickly.

Your PSA level may start to rise again after radiotherapy because your prostate will still produce some PSA. However, a significant rise in your PSA level may be a sign that your cancer has returned and you may need further treatment. If your PSA level does start to rise, talk to your specialist team about what treatment might be suitable for you.

You can find more information about PSA levels after radiotherapy in our booklet, **Recurrent prostate cancer**, or call our confidential Helpline on 0800 074 8383.

## What are the side effects?

Side effects can happen when the normal healthy cells next to the prostate are exposed to radiation. Many of these healthy cells are able to recover and so side effects may only last a few weeks or months. However, some side effects can take longer to develop and can become long term problems.

The most common side effects are described here. There is no way of knowing which, if any, you will get and radiotherapy will affect each

man differently. Ask your specialist team about the risk of side effects. You can also ask them to show you their past results.

Your treatment centre may arrange for you to have regular appointments with someone in your specialist team, where you can discuss any symptoms that are worrying you. You will also see a radiographer every time you go for treatment who will be able to give you information and support. Side effects can often be treated so, if you experience anything unusual after having radiotherapy, ask your specialist team about it. You can also call our confidential Helpline on 0800 074 8383.

## Short term side effects

These can develop during or shortly after your treatment.

### Bowel problems

The bowel and back passage are exposed to radiation because they are close to the area being treated. This may not cause any problems, but in most men it causes the lining of the bowel to become inflamed (proctitis), which then leads to symptoms. Before you start radiotherapy, tell your specialist team if you have ever had any problems with your bowels because this may increase your risk of further bowel problems after treatment.

Symptoms vary from man to man. Many men will notice that their stools become loose and watery (diarrhoea). They may pass more wind, need to go to the toilet more often, or have to rush to the toilet (rectal urgency). Some men feel the need to have a bowel movement, but then find that they are unable to go. You may leak stools (faecal incontinence) or get pain around the abdomen or back passage. You may feel that you have not emptied your bowels properly. Some men get bleeding from the rectum, but this is less common. You should let your specialist team know if this happens.

These symptoms usually start during the first few weeks of treatment. Symptoms usually begin to settle down a few weeks after you have finished your treatment, although some men may find that some of the symptoms last longer.

You should tell your specialist team about any changes in your bowel habits and talk to them before taking any medication for your symptoms. They may give you creams or drugs to help.

Your specialist team may give you advice on your diet but usually you should follow a normal diet and drink plenty of fluids. Although a diet high in fibre such as fruit and vegetables is generally healthy, some men may find that too much fibre makes diarrhoea worse. Eating a low fibre diet for a short time may help with these symptoms. Low fibre foods include rice, potatoes (without skins), pasta and meat.

Some men may find that gentle exercise, such as regular walks, can help with bowel problems after radiotherapy.

### Urinary problems

Radiotherapy can irritate the lining of the bladder. This can cause a burning feeling when you pass urine, difficulty passing urine, a need to pass urine more often and more at night, and sometimes blood in the urine. This is known as radiation cystitis. Symptoms may appear within a week or two of starting treatment but these usually start to improve once your course of treatment is finished.

Tell your specialist team if you develop any urinary symptoms. They will check whether they are being caused by radiotherapy or by an infection. Drink plenty of fluids but try to reduce coffee, tea and alcohol because they can irritate the bladder.

Some men find that drinking cranberry juice helps. However, avoid it if you are taking the drug warfarin to thin your blood because it can increase the effect of the drug.

#### **A personal experience**

*“I had no side effects for the first few days but towards the end of treatment it became a case of when I had to go, I needed to go straight away.”*

### Tiredness

Towards the end of your treatment, you may feel more tired than usual. Regular gentle

exercise, such as walking, can help to prevent and improve tiredness. Many men continue to work throughout their treatment but if tiredness becomes a problem you may need to take some time off work. Most men recover completely from their tiredness within a couple of months of finishing treatment.

#### **A personal experience**

*“One invaluable tip was to take a short rest each day when I got back home after having treatment.”*

### Skin irritation and hair loss

This is less common than it used to be as radiotherapy techniques have improved in recent years. Towards the end of treatment, the skin between your legs and around your back passage may become a bit darker in colour and sore, like sunburn. Tell your specialist team if you have any of these symptoms. Avoid using any creams, lotions or perfumed soaps unless you are advised to do so by your specialist team. Wear loose, cotton clothes and try to keep the area cool. Avoid hot baths.

You may also notice that you lose some hair in the area that has been treated (pubic hair). This usually grows back but hair loss can be permanent in some men. You will not lose any hair on other parts of your body or your head.

### Painful ejaculation

The tube that you pass urine and semen through (urethra) can become inflamed. This may make ejaculation uncomfortable, but this should improve after you finish treatment. If you are worried about this, speak to your specialist team.

### Long term side effects

Most side effects will settle down after your radiotherapy treatment has finished. However, some side effects can become long term or permanent. These can start to appear several months after you finish your treatment.

Older age, diabetes, previous bowel or prostate surgery, and previous bladder and bowel problems can all increase your risk of getting long term side effects. Speak to your specialist team about your own risk.



been exposed to the radiation beams, can be damaged, causing a cancer to grow. The types of cancer that may develop include bladder, colon and rectal cancers. It may take at least five years after treatment with radiotherapy for a second cancer to appear.

### Where can I get support?

As well as getting medical help to treat your cancer, you may find that it helps to talk to family or friends about how you are feeling. Sharing concerns can make any decisions about your treatment easier to deal with. You could also speak to your specialist team or call our confidential Helpline on 0800 074 8383.

Partners and family also often worry about their loved one, and may find it helpful to talk to the specialist team.

Some people find that it helps to talk to other men who have had radiotherapy. There are prostate cancer support groups throughout the country. You can find details of your nearest group on our website or ask your specialist team.

We can also arrange for someone who has experience of radiotherapy to speak to you through our peer support service. Please call the Helpline on 0800 074 8383 for more information. If you have access to the internet, you can sign up to The Prostate Cancer Charity message boards at [www.prostate-cancer.org.uk](http://www.prostate-cancer.org.uk)

**A personal experience**

*“It is helpful and relaxing to chat with the other men in the waiting area, a shared experience lets you know that you are not on your own.”*

### Questions to ask your specialist team

- How many radiotherapy sessions will I have?**
- Will I have hormone treatment? Will this continue after the radiotherapy?**
- What side effects might I get? Will these be temporary or permanent?**
- Will I be able to continue as normal during the treatment (go to work etc)?**
- How will we know how successful the treatment has been?**
- If the radiotherapy is not successful, which other treatments can I have?**
- Who should I contact if I have any questions at any point during my treatment?**

### More information

**The Prostate Cancer Charity**

This fact sheet is part of the Tool Kit. Call our confidential Helpline on **0800 074 8383** or visit our website at [www.prostate-cancer.org.uk](http://www.prostate-cancer.org.uk) for more Tool Kit fact sheets, including an **A-Z of medical words** which explains some of the words and phrases used in this sheet.

**UK Prostate Link**

[www.prostate-link.org.uk](http://www.prostate-link.org.uk)  
UK Prostate Link helps you find reliable information about all aspects of prostate cancer.

**‘Going for a’ website**

[www.goingfora.com](http://www.goingfora.com)  
Virtual hospital from the Royal College of Radiologists. Interactive information on cancer treatment and scans. Includes descriptions from both staff and patients.

**Sexual Advice Association**

[www.sda.uk.net](http://www.sda.uk.net)  
Helpline: 020 7486 7262  
Information on treatments for erectile dysfunction.

The Prostate Cancer Charity makes every effort to make sure that its services provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate facts about prostate cancer. We hope that these will add to the medical advice you have had and will help you to make any decisions you may face. Please contact your doctor if you are worried about any medical issues.

The Prostate Cancer Charity funds research into the causes of, and treatments for, prostate cancer. We also provide support and information to anyone concerned about prostate cancer. We rely on charitable donations to continue this work. If you would like to make a donation, please call us on 020 8222 7666.

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150 Brand Street, Glasgow G51 1DH  
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Website: [www.prostate-cancer.org.uk](http://www.prostate-cancer.org.uk)



Free and confidential Helpline  
**0800 074 8383\***  
Mon - Fri 10am - 4pm, Wed 7pm - 9pm

Email: [helpline@prostate-cancer.org.uk](mailto:helpline@prostate-cancer.org.uk)

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\* Calls are free of charge from UK landlines. Mobile phone charges may vary. Calls may be monitored for training purposes. Confidentiality is maintained between callers and The Prostate Cancer Charity.

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## More information continued

### CancerHelp UK

[www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)

Freephone helpline: 0808 800 4040

Mon - Fri 9am-5pm

CancerHelp UK is the patient information website of Cancer Research UK. It contains information on radiotherapy and living with cancer.

### Macmillan Cancer Support

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Macmillan Helpline: 0808 808 00 00

Mon-Fri 9am-8pm

Information on coping with cancer and treatment as well as financial support for people with cancer, family and friends.

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References to sources of information used in the production of this fact sheet are available on our website.

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