

External beam radiotherapy

This fact sheet is for men who are thinking about having radiotherapy to treat their prostate cancer. It is also for friends and family who would like to know more about this type of treatment. It is one of a series of fact sheets that have been written to help you decide which treatment is best for you. It describes how prostate cancer is treated using a type of radiation directed at the prostate gland from outside the body. Each hospital and specialist team will do things slightly differently so use this fact sheet as a general guide to what to expect and ask your specialist team for more details about the treatment you will have.

This fact sheet does not describe internal radiotherapy (brachytherapy). For information on this treatment, please read our Tool Kit fact sheets, **Brachytherapy** and **High dose rate brachytherapy**. This fact sheet does not cover the use of radiotherapy for pain relief in advanced prostate cancer. If you would like more information about this, you can read our Tool Kit fact sheet, **Palliative radiotherapy**.

In this fact sheet:

- Who can have radiotherapy?
- How does radiotherapy treat prostate cancer?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages?
- What does treatment involve?
- What happens afterwards?
- What are the side effects?
- Where can I get support?
- Questions to ask your specialist team
- More information

Radiotherapy is a suitable treatment for men of any age and is as effective at treating localised prostate cancer as surgery to remove the prostate (radical prostatectomy).

You may be given external beam radiotherapy alongside brachytherapy or high dose rate brachytherapy (internal radiotherapy). This increases the total amount of radiation, which can improve the effectiveness of treatment, but may also increase the risk of side effects.

Radiotherapy can also be used after surgery if your PSA level starts to rise or if not all the cancer was removed with surgery.

Who can have radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is one of the treatments that can be used to treat cancer that is still contained within the prostate gland (localised prostate cancer). Radiotherapy may also be suitable for some men whose cancer has spread to the area just outside the prostate (locally advanced prostate cancer).

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

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 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
UK Prostate Link helps you find reliable information about all aspects of prostate cancer.

‘Going for a’ website

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
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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100 Cambridge Grove, London W6 0LE
Email: info@prostate-cancer.org.uk
Telephone: 020 8222 7622

The Prostate Cancer Charity Scotland
Unit F22-24 Festival Business Centre,
150 Brand Street, Glasgow G51 1DH
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Website: 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

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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.

A charity registered in England and Wales(1005541) and in Scotland (SCO39332)

More information continued

CancerHelp UK

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

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.

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

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