

Radioiodine therapy for thyroid cancer

Nuclear Medicine Department



Patient information leaflet

This leaflet contains some very important information for you and your family/partner so please read the whole leaflet.

Scope of this information leaflet

This information leaflet will give you details about what to expect when you come for your radioiodine therapy, how to prepare for it and the precautions you will need to take once you leave the hospital.

Radioiodine therapy

Radioiodine is given to kill off any remaining normal thyroid or thyroid cancer cells left after surgery. This means you won't need external radiotherapy. It's an effective thyroid cancer treatment, even if the cancer has spread to other parts of the body. Thyroid cancer cells in other parts of the body take up iodine in the same way as normal thyroid cells. Most thyroid cancers can be treated with radioiodine. Along with your surgery, it will maximise the chances of eradicating your cancer. Some patients choose not to have this treatment, however this is something that should be discussed with your Oncologist.

You will be given the radioiodine in a small capsule. If you are taking thyroid hormones, you may need to stop taking these so the therapy will be more effective. This will normally be for 2 to 4 weeks before your treatment. Some people find that they feel tired when they stop their thyroid replacement tablets.

Your doctor may offer you thyrogen injections instead to make the therapy more effective. You would have these on the two days before your therapy. This means you don't need to stop taking your thyroid hormones. However, these injections are not suitable for everyone.

Possible side effects

Most patients do not have any side effects from radioiodine treatment. Some patients may feel a tightness or swelling in the throat or feel flushed. This usually lasts for no more than 24 hours. If this goes on longer, please let the nursing staff know. They will be able to prescribe some medication to relieve this problem. Sometimes having radioiodine can result in a short-term taste disturbance. This can last for a few weeks. Drinking lots of fluids after the treatment helps to reduce this problem. If you notice these effects, then chewing gum or sucking sweets can help.

Pregnancy, breast feeding and fathering children

If you are pregnant or think you may be pregnant you should not have radioiodine. Please tell either your doctor or the staff in the Nuclear Medicine Department.

After radioiodine, women should not become pregnant for 6 months and men should not father children for 4 months.

If you are breastfeeding, you should talk about this with your health visitor. You will not be able to continue to breastfeed when your treatment starts. Breast feeding should cease a minimum of 6 weeks before the treatment.

Your diet before Radioiodine treatment

A diet that is rich in iodine can make the treatment less effective. So for 2 weeks before coming into hospital you need to follow a low iodine diet. Please see the Low Iodine Diet sheet for more details.

How do I follow a low iodine diet?

Note: This is aiming for a **low** iodine diet and not a 'no' iodine diet or iodine-free diet.

Iodine has nothing to do with sodium. Sodium is in most foods and is allowed, as long as it is not iodised. Non-iodised salt is allowed, as long as it is not sea salt.

There is some information on the internet about iodine diets. Please be wary of sites that are not British as the iodine occurring naturally, and that added to food, varies from country to country. All information from the internet needs to come from a reliable source which has a credible reference source for the information.

Do eat;

- Fresh meat
- Fresh fruit
- Fresh vegetables
- Pasta and rice

Avoid foods high in iodine;

- Fish, seafood and sea products (e.g. seaweed)
- Sea salt or iodised table salt. Ordinary table salt is allowed
- Foods that are artificially coloured pink or red such as canned and glacé cherries, canned strawberries and salami. They may contain the colour E127 which is rich in iodine. Foods coloured by spices rather than dyes are allowed

Do not take;

- Cough medicines or vitamin and minerals supplements as many of these contain iodine

Dairy products contain some iodine so reduce (but need not exclude) your intake of

- Eggs
- Cheese
- Milk and milk products

Why do I need to come into hospital?

Unlike external radiotherapy, this treatment makes you radioactive for a period of time. The amount of radioactivity in your body will naturally go down over time. You will need to stay in hospital for a few days until the levels of radioactivity are lower.

What happens while I am in hospital?

You will normally be admitted to the hospital on a Monday morning. The staff will take a blood sample and go over the procedure with you. This is a good time to ask questions. You will be admitted to the ward and seen by a doctor during the day. The therapy can only go ahead after the results of your blood test come back. You will need to stay in hospital from the Monday, even though you will usually be given the capsule on Tuesday morning.

Each day the staff will measure the amount of radioiodine left in your body. This allows them to work out when you may go home. It is often Thursday, but may be a day earlier or later. This will depend on how quickly the iodine leaves your body.

To help increase the speed that the radioiodine leaves your body, it is helpful to:

- drink plenty of fluid (up to twice as much as usual)
- have a shower every day
- eat as normal (you can start your normal diet 24 hours after the tablet)

What safety precautions are taken with the treatment?

The following steps must be taken to lower the risks to staff and visitors:

- You will stay in a single ensuite room. It includes: TV with Freeview, DVD player, radio, cold water dispenser, tea and coffee making facilities, refrigerator, telephone. You can make internal calls on the phones and receive external calls. There is Wi-Fi in the room
- Do not walk around barefoot. Please wear slippers or shoes and do not leave the room
- Men, please sit down when using the toilet to avoid getting urine on the floor
- Bed linen will not be changed unless soiled or requested
- Everything in the room must be checked by a physicist before it is taken out of the room

What should I bring into hospital with me?

You are welcome to bring in belongings with you, but they have to be checked before you leave. We may have to keep them in the hospital for a few days after you go home. This is because small amounts of radioiodine will be lost in your urine and sweat. This usually only affects clothing and some toiletries. We will wash clothing before returning to you. We cannot post the items to you and we can only keep them for a limited time due to storage space.

Items that are useful include:

- Pyjamas (very likely to be retained)
- Slippers (likely to be retained)
- Clothes to wear in the room (very likely to be retained)
- Books/magazines (unlikely to be retained, no library books)
- DVDs (will not be retained)
- Mobile phone (covered in cling film so will not be retained)
- Wash kit (please bring a toothbrush that can be thrown away before you go home)
- Boiled sweets/gum
- Medication that you are taking (will not be retained)
- A complete change of clothes with you to wear when you are discharged (including shoes).

The hospital provides towels and blankets. You can ask for more whenever you need them.

There will be plenty of chances to ask questions before, during and after your treatment. It may help to bring a list of questions with you. If you have any concerns or queries, then staff will also be available on the phone at all times. They will gladly come and see you if you would like to talk to someone face-to-face.

You will need to stay in your room at all times after you have had the capsule. However, staff will come in to check on you and see if you need anything. You can have visitors for an hour each from the day after you have been given the capsule.

If you would like any more information, then you can call the relevant department on the phone numbers below. You can find out more information about this treatment on the websites as listed.

May I have visitors following the administration?

All visitors must report to the Onslow Ward desk.

- No visitors may visit for the first 24 hours after the iodine capsule. Then one visitor at a time for no more than one hour. The visitor sits on the other side of the room.
- Visitors are not able to eat or drink in the room or take anything from the room.
- Pregnant women and children under 18 years old are not able to visit.

What restrictions are there when I go home?

- Avoid close contact (stay at least one metre apart) with:
 - Adults and children over 5 years, usually for at least 3 days.
 - Pregnant women and children 5 years old and under, usually for a week.
 - Work – you may need to take time off work after your hospital stay. This is very likely if you work in close contact with children and pregnant women.

This advice will change from patient to patient and can be shorter or much longer. The precautions cannot be worked out fully until you have your treatment.

Public transport may be used for journeys up to an hour.

There is no time limit for private transport. It is advised to sit in the back seat with no other passengers.

When at home, good standards of hygiene will stop any contamination.

What happens after my treatment?

You will have a whole body scan and a scan of your neck region in the Department of Nuclear Medicine. You will be given the date along with your treatment appointment. This is painless and takes about 60-90 minutes in total. A special camera takes pictures of you while you lie on a couch. This looks at where the radioiodine has gone in your body.

If you stopped taking your thyroid hormones, you will be given thyroid replacement tablets to start after the treatment. You will be seen in the clinic within 2 weeks. Your doctor will have the results of your scan and the blood test. You may need further scans or another radioiodine therapy depending on these results.

Reference source

www.british-thyroid-association.org/current-bta-guidelines

Further information

The British Thyroid Association

- www.british-thyroid-association.org/information-for-professionals-and-patients#Patientinformation

Macmillan

- www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Cancertypes/Thyroid/Thyroidcancer.aspx

Contact details

Royal Surrey County Hospital:	01483 571122
Onslow Ward:	01483 406858
Oncology Outpatient Appointments:	01483 406761
Nuclear Medicine Department:	01483 406701
Fountain Centre:	01483 406618

PALS and Advocacy contact details

Contact details of independent advocacy services can be provided by our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who are located on the right hand side as you enter the main reception area. PALS are also your first point of contact for health related issues, questions or concerns surrounding RSCH patient services.

Telephone: 01483 402757

Email: rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net

Opening hours: 9.00am–3.00pm, Monday to Friday

If you would like information documents in large print, on tape or in another language or form please contact PALS.

Past review date: September 2017

Future review date: September 2020

Author: Felicity Horton

PIN170908–1300

