

Superficial radiotherapy to the skin

Radiotherapy Department



Patient information leaflet

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Please see the department's website for additional information. The site also provides information on recent patient surveys carried out in the department and any actions arising from the results.

www.royalsurrey.nhs.uk/st-lukes-centre

St Luke's Cancer Centre

Please be aware that St Luke's Cancer Centre has two radiotherapy departments. One is located at the Royal Surrey County Hospital in Guildford and the other at East Surrey Hospital in Redhill. Please refer to your appointment letters for the location of all your appointments. All the information contained in this leaflet is relevant to both sites.

Introduction

Your clinical oncologist has decided that a course of radiotherapy would be the most appropriate way of treating your cancer. When recommending radiotherapy, your doctor takes into account the risk of the cancer returning or growing if no radiotherapy is given. While the treatment may have some side effects, it is felt that the advantages for you would outweigh the disadvantages.

At this stage your clinical oncologist will probably have discussed with you the risks and benefits of undergoing a course of radiotherapy and you may have been given a consent form to sign agreeing to have the treatment.

The short and long term risks of receiving radiotherapy to your skin are outlined towards the end of this leaflet.

Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet is specifically for patients having radiotherapy to the skin using either photons or electrons.

Your treatment will be tailor-made for your specific needs. It may differ slightly from what is described in this leaflet, and also from what another patient with a similar diagnosis may be having.

What is superficial radiotherapy?

Superficial radiotherapy is a painless treatment using either X-rays or electrons (forms of ionising radiation). The treatment only penetrates a short distance below the skin surface and normal tissues are protected as much as possible. This means that there are very few side effects associated with superficial treatment. Treatment is given externally with the patient lying on a treatment couch. Superficial treatment can be given using a machine called Gulmay or a machine called a linear accelerator (or Linac for short).



Your doctor will decide which type of treatment is most appropriate for your skin cancer. This will depend on the type, stage, and location of the cancer, and depth of spread into the skin layers.



What are the alternatives?

You may decide that you do not want to have radiotherapy; this is an option you can choose. Talk again with your doctor if you wish and let him/her know what you have decided.

You may request a second opinion on your diagnosis or treatment at any time during your consultation or treatment process. Please speak to your clinical oncologist or GP.

What happens before treatment starts?

Following your initial outpatient appointment with your doctor you will receive an appointment to attend the radiotherapy department for a pre-treatment appointment. This appointment could be for Gulmay, mould room or the CT scanner, depending on exactly how the doctor wishes to treat your skin cancer. It is helpful to bring your appointment letter and a dressing gown with you.

A member of the radiotherapy team will explain what is going to happen and give you a further opportunity to discuss your treatment and side effects before proceeding with the treatment preparation. However, if you feel you have questions that you would like to address to the doctor, a radiographer can organise a meeting for you. During this discussion you will be asked to confirm your name, address and date of birth. You will be asked for this information before every procedure/treatment undertaken in the department. The following subjects will also be addressed;

- **Confirmation of consent:** you will probably have already signed a consent form with your clinical oncologist. That consent will be re-confirmed with a radiographer prior to your first planning session to ensure that you still agree to proceed with the proposed treatment.
- **Pacemakers:** If you have a pacemaker and you did NOT discuss this with your clinical oncologist when you signed the radiotherapy consent form please phone the CT scanner to let them know. The number is at the end of this information leaflet. It is safe to give radiotherapy to patients who have a pacemaker but there are a few precautions we may need to take. The radiotherapy department will send you an information sheet entitled 'Pacemakers and Radiotherapy' for you to read and keep with your other patient information leaflets. This leaflet will explain why extra precautions may be needed and what those may be. It will also highlight any extra appointments you may need to attend the hospital for. Please bring your pacemaker ID card to your first appointment.

- **Pregnancy:** all female patients under the age of 55 will be asked to confirm their pregnancy status before the first planning session starts. It is very important that you are not and do not become pregnant while undergoing radiotherapy planning and treatment. If you think you may be pregnant at any time during your course of treatment please tell your clinical oncologist or radiographer immediately. If necessary please speak to your doctor about contraception methods suitable for use during radiotherapy.

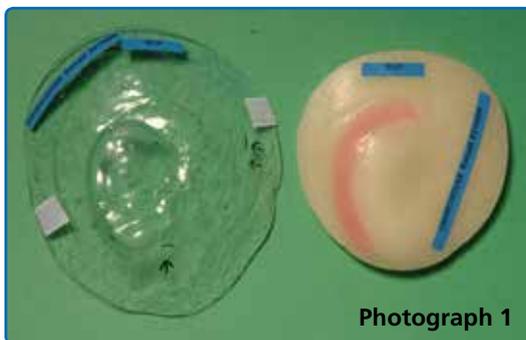
For patients who are to have treatment on Gulmay please go to the section that describes this type of treatment.

Linac treatments

For those patients who have received a Linac appointment.

Before treatment begins: the Mould Room.

- If you are to receive treatment on a Linac it is normally necessary to make a plastic mask to be worn over the treatment area at each treatment session.
- The mask is to ensure the exact area to be treated is clearly shown and to allow various accessories (usually pieces of wax) to be placed securely around the treatment area. See photograph 1.



- Your doctor will be present in the mould room to decide exactly where the treatment is to go. This may involve placing pen marks on your skin. These can be removed once the planning session is over.
- A member of the medical physics team will also be present in the mould room. There may be a lot of discussion between the staff members about the best way to deliver your treatment.

- The mask-making process starts with the mould room staff taking an impression of the area on your body to be treated. Dental impression material (alginate) and plaster of Paris are used. The procedure can be messy, but painless. See photograph 2.
- You will be provided with facilities for tidying yourself up after the procedure.



- The plastic mask takes a few days to make once the impression has been taken.
- In order to show clearly how you are positioned on the couch, the mould room staff may take a digital photograph of you. They will get your permission for this beforehand and the image will only be accessible by the radiographers.
- The whole process should take approximately 30-40 minutes.

Treatment

Please check your appointment letter for exact location of your appointment. It is helpful to bring your appointment letter and a dressing gown with you.

One of the treatment team will greet you and discuss your treatment with you. This discussion provides an opportunity to ask questions that may have arisen since your last appointment. There is space at the end of this leaflet to write down anything you may want to ask.

A radiographer will call you into the treatment room, introduce you to the team members present and asked you to lie on the treatment couch.

- The radiographers will place the plastic mask over the area to be treated.
- The radiographers will then begin to get you into the correct position.
- The mask can be removed at any time if you feel anxious or uncomfortable.

- When you are positioned correctly the treatment couch will be quite high up (about 4.5 ft.). **Therefore it is very important you do not move or attempt to get off the couch.** The radiographer will tell you when it is safe to sit up and get off the couch.
- Once you and the machine are in the correct position the radiographers will leave the room and turn the machine on.
- The treatment is completely painless and lasts about a minute.
- The radiographers are able to see you at all times so if you need to communicate with them raise your arm.
- The whole procedure will take approximately 10-20 minutes.
- Once the treatment is complete you are free to go home.

Gulmay treatment

For those who have received an appointment for Gulmay

- For patients receiving treatment on Gulmay the planning and first treatment usually happen on the same day.
- Your doctor will place pen marks on your skin, showing the exact area to be treated. Photograph 3 shows pen marks placed on the skin.
- An appropriately sized and shaped lead cut-out will be selected to allow treatment of the marked area, while protecting the surrounding healthy skin. Photograph 4 shows a lead cut out taped in place.



- The doctor will decide the radiation dose and the number of days it is to be given over. The radiographers will then calculate the time required for each treatment. This may take a little while, but is only necessary on the first day.
- The radiographers will then begin to get you in the right position. The machine will come to rest on the lead cut-out and press gently onto the skin (photograph 5). It is very important that you keep very still during the setting up process and the actual treatment.



Photograph 5

- If the area to be treated is near a sensitive organ, such as the lens of the eye or nostril, a small lead shield will be placed over the area to protect it from the treatment.
- Once everything is in the correct position the radiographer will leave the room and close the door.
- They can see you the whole time via a CCTV system. If you need them during the treatment please wave your arm.
- Treatment time does vary from patient to patient but on average is about four minutes long.
- Once the treatment is complete the radiographers will record the exact location of the treated area to ensure accurate replication of the set-up for each subsequent treatment. This will involve taking measurements, taking a tracing of the area using a plastic sheet, and taking a digital photograph. Your permission will be sought for the photograph and it will only be accessible to the radiographers treating you.
- If the area being treated is in a discreet place you may be asked to try and keep the pen marks on for subsequent treatments.

- The whole procedure usually takes about 40 minutes.
- Subsequent appointments take about 10-20 minutes.
- You will be given a list of all your appointment times, including review clinics. Treatment schedules vary from daily treatment to three times a week and from five treatments in total to nine or ten. The schedule chosen depends on the site, stage and type of skin cancer you have.

If the area to be treated is in an awkward position or near sensitive structures, a lead mask may need to be made (photograph 6).

This will be done in the mould room and is similar to the procedure used for electron patients having a plastic mask made.



Photograph 6

Very occasionally, when treatment is required very close to the lens of the eye a patient may have to wear a lead contact lens. If this is a possibility in your case the doctor will explain this to you at your initial outpatient appointment. A local anaesthetic is used to numb the eye before inserting the contact lens. Patients are therefore unable to drive for an hour or so after treatment has been given.

What sort of side effects might I have, and for how long?

Short term risks

For all superficial treatments

Short term effects begin to occur about a week after treatment has started. If you are having a course of five treatments, then this will be after your treatment has finished. In most cases short term effects get worse for about 2-3 weeks after treatment and then slowly improve. Patients having treatment for a skin lymphoma will experience less noticeable side effects as the radiation doses used are lower.

Skin soreness: you may find that the skin in the treated area gradually becomes reddened and sore to touch. At the end of your treatment the skin in the treatment area is likely to be red, itchy or inflamed. It may ooze, bleed and scab over several times before it heals. This may take a month to six weeks to happen. It will stay red or brown for a few months before it fades.

- If applicable, we advise you to wear non-irritant, loose clothing over the treatment area and avoid the use of adhesive dressings. It is very important that no adhesive material is placed in the treated area as the skin may break when the material is removed.
- We recommend that you wash the treated area using plain water and gently pat it dry afterwards.
- Please avoid using commercial skin creams and lotions, cosmetics and perfumes in the treatment area as using them can make any skin reaction worse.
- You may find that the skin in the treated area becomes pink and slightly sore to touch. Wash with plain water in the area. Using a moisturiser can help to soothe the skin and a suitable cream will be recommended to you by the radiographers on your first day.
- If the area being treated is on the scalp, please do not use a hair dryer, hair dye or perming lotion in the area. When washing hair be very gentle and use a baby shampoo.

- If the area being treated is on the face please do not wet shave in that area or use hair removal creams.
- We recommend that you do not expose the area to bright sunlight for a prolonged period of time during your treatment and afterwards. If your treatment is to an area on the head, it is advisable to wear a hat when outdoors.

Hair loss: towards the end of your treatment, or once it is finished, you will begin to lose hair that was included in the treatment area. This may start to re-grow about 3 months after the end of treatment but in some circumstances hair loss may be permanent. Your doctor will discuss this with you.

As your treatment progresses the radiographers will be talking to you each day to find out how you are feeling. This is so they may offer help and support if the treatment gives you any problems. Please feel free to discuss any issues that may be concerning you.

Long term risks

Long term effects can occur months or years after a treatment has finished.

Patients having treatment for a skin lymphoma will experience less noticeable side effects as the radiation doses used are lower.

Skin: your skin in the treatment area may continue to be slightly more fragile than before and we suggest that you use a high factor sun cream on the treatment area if you are going to be outside. You should also protect the area from cold, wind and abrasion. Once the initial redness has faded away you will notice that the treated area becomes paler. Some patients notice that small veins appear visible just under the skin surface. This is known as telangiectasia.

What happens when treatment ends?

- On the last day of your treatment a radiographer will explain that the treatment will carry on working for another 2-3 weeks. Any short term side effects may even get slightly more noticeable during this time but after that they should gradually improve.
- The radiographer will make sure you have a follow-up appointment with your clinical oncologist. This may be at a hospital nearer to your home.
- You will be given a leaflet and two copies of a discharge summary. One copy is for your records and the other for you to give to your GP. In due course a letter summarising your treatment in more detail will be sent through the post to your GP.
- Please remember that you are free to contact the department at any time after your treatment has finished should you have any concerns or questions. Contact numbers are at the end of this leaflet.

Where can I get further support?

Further support can be given by the various support centres at Guildford, East Surrey, Crawley and Purley. These centres provide information, complementary therapies, support groups and one to one support.

To find out more contact the individual centres or ask radiotherapy department staff for a leaflet.

The Fountain Centre is located in St Luke's Cancer Centre at Guildford.

- Telephone: 01483 406618
- Website: www.fountaincancersupport.com

The East Surrey Macmillan Cancer Support Centre is located at East Surrey Hospital.

- Telephone: 01737 304176
- Email: informationcentre.sash@nhs.net

The Olive Tree is located in Crawley Hospital, Crawley.

- Telephone: 01293 534466
- Website: www.olivetrecancersupport.org.uk

South East Cancer Help Centre is located in Purley, Surrey.

- Telephone: 020 86680974
- Website: www.sechc.org.uk

Useful numbers

Telephone numbers across both sites (Guildford/Redhill)

- Treatment Appointments 01483 571122 ext 6632
- Onslow Ward (out-of-hours) 01483 571122 ext 6858
- For urgent enquiries (out-of-hours) Call hospital switchboard on **01483 571122** and ask operator to bleep the on-call oncology SHO.

Guildford numbers

- Radiotherapy Reception 01483 406600
- Oncology CT scanner 01483 406630
- Patient Review Office 01483 571122 ext 2066
- Clinical Nurse Specialist 01483 571122 ext 4831
- Gulmay Machine (9am–12pm only) 01483 406610
- Mould Room 01483 406640
- CT Scanner 01483 406630

Redhill numbers

- Radiotherapy Reception 01737 277311
- Oncology CT Scanner 01737 768511 ext 1202
- Patient Support Office 01737 277315

Other support websites and groups

British Association of Dermatologists

- Telephone: 0207 383 0266
- Website: www.bad.org.uk

Cancer Research UK

- Telephone: 0808 800 4040
- Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

Macmillan Cancer Support

- Telephone: 0808 808 0000
- Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Quit 51

- Telephone: 0800 622 6968
- Website: www.quit51.co.uk

Additional information

- In order to continually improve treatments and services, audits are regularly carried out in the department. This can involve using patient notes. The notes will have all identifiable details removed to ensure patient confidentiality. However, if this is unacceptable to you please let your consultant know so your wishes can be respected.
- Clinical trials are undertaken within the department. If appropriate your doctor will discuss this with you.
- If you require this information in a different format or language please let a member of staff know as soon as possible.
- Staff at St Luke's Cancer Centre cannot take responsibility for patient belongings brought into the hospital. Please keep all your personal belongings with you at all times and leave valuables at home.

Reference sources

- Radiotherapy Clinical Protocol – Skin Tumours – Royal Surrey County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust 2012
- Treating Skin Cancer – Cancer Research UK 2014

If you wish to make a comment or complaint about any aspect of the treatment or services provided by St. Luke's Cancer Centre and its staff please speak to a member of St. Luke's. Alternatively you can visit, email, phone or write to the **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**. Their contact details are:

PALS office in the main hospital reception area, telephone **01483 402757** or write to:

PALS Manager
Royal Surrey County Hospital NHS Trust
Egerton Road
Guildford
GU2 7XX

- Email: rsc-tr.pals@nhs.uk
- www.royalsurrey.nhs.uk

You may also write to the Chief Executive of the Trust at:

Royal Surrey County Hospital NHS Trust
Egerton Road
Guildford
GU2 7XX

Radiotherapy contact details

Radiotherapy reception

Telephone: 01483 406 600

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.

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Author: Elizabeth West & Immanuel Jeevarathnam

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