



**Barwon
Health**



HEAD AND NECK TREATMENT INFORMATION BOOKLET



Department of Radiation Oncology
Cancer Services, University Hospital Geelong

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Below: The Andrew Love Cancer Centre located at University Hospital Geelong (Swanston Street entrance). Open 8am - 5pm.



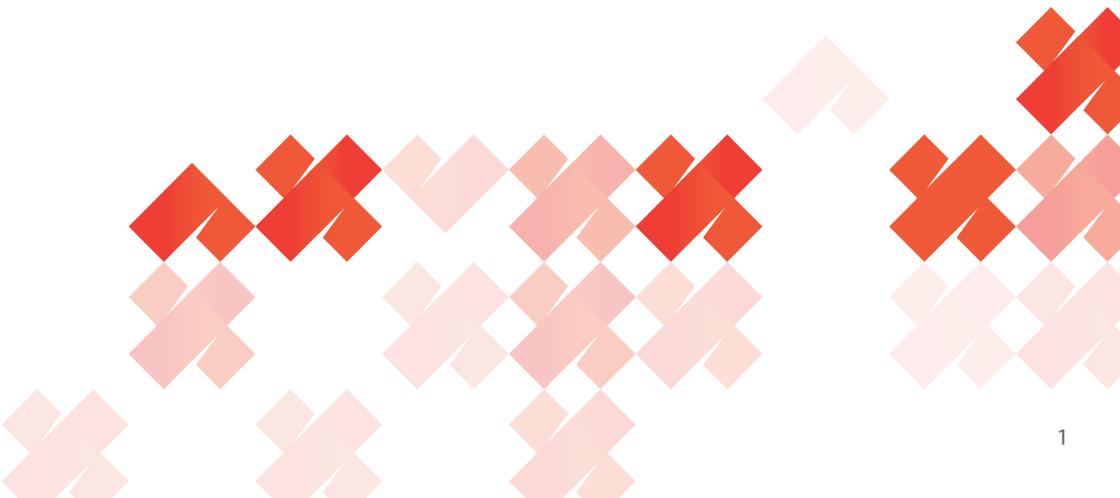
WHAT IS RADIOTHERAPY?

Radiotherapy is the use of radiation to destroy cancer cells. It works because cancer cells are more sensitive to radiation than normal cells. If a small dose of radiation is given each day over several weeks, normal cells recover from radiation but cancer cells cannot.

Radiotherapy is often given to patients who have cancers that arise (primary cancers) or have spread to the head and neck region (metastases).

Radiotherapy can be used with the aim to cure a cancer or it may be given with the aim to relieve symptoms.

Radiotherapy can be used in conjunction with other types of treatment, such as surgery (pre or post-operative), chemotherapy or combinations of all of these.



WHAT IS THE PROCESS?

During a consultation with your radiation oncologist (doctor) at the Andrew Love Cancer Centre (ALCC), your treatment options will be discussed and a decision made to proceed with treatment.

The condition of your teeth is important during and after radiotherapy treatment. Your radiation oncologist may ask you to see a dentist prior to treatment to assess your teeth and prepare them for radiotherapy. Dentures may also need to be adjusted to avoid irritation to the gums and mouth.

You may be asked to see a medical oncologist who will discuss issues related to chemotherapy and a dietitian may also be requested to perform an assessment on you.

Before your radiotherapy treatment can begin, the area to be treated needs to be defined. This occurs during a planning session. We will contact you by phone to advise you of the booking we have for your planning session.

At the planning session a radiation therapist will take a CT scan of the area indicated by your radiation oncologist to help plan your treatment. Measurements will be taken and a thermoplastic mask will be made to ensure stability during daily treatment. An IV contrast may be requested for this scan. If so, a blood test request and further information will be given to you.

Also at the planning visit you will be given an appointment time to commence your radiotherapy. There are limited appointment times for the first treatment visit so options may seem restricted however, your remaining appointment times will be discussed with you on your first treatment day and booked at times that best suit your needs depending on availability.

Following your planning session a radiotherapy nurse will discuss skin care and side-effects with you, as well as address any needs or concerns that you may have regarding treatment.

On the day of your first treatment, please check in with your appointment card at our reception desk and take a seat in the waiting room. A radiation therapist will meet with you and discuss the procedure about to take place before taking you through to the treatment area. Once in the treatment room, you will be placed in the same position as you were for the planning session and treatment will be delivered. You will be in the treatment room for up to 10-15 minutes each visit and the treatment may last for approximately 30 seconds to a minute from several different angles.

When you arrive each subsequent day for treatment, please hand your appointment booklet to the receptionist at the front desk and have a seat in the waiting room. You will then be invited through to the treatment area by one of the radiation therapists.

Below: The Linear Accelerator – used to deliver your treatment.





We encourage your family to watch your treatment at some stage, so there is better understanding of the daily activity.

Whilst attending for a course of radiotherapy, a doctor will see you once each week in the treatment department. Nursing staff are also on hand to assist with any problems related to your treatment.

The time spent in the Centre may be as much as one hour each day depending on daily waiting times and your need to see a doctor or one of the nurses.

It is encouraged that you do not lose weight during your treatment course. To help maintain your weight, you will see the oncology dietitian in your first week of treatment where your dietary intake will be discussed. You will then see the dietitian weekly.

WILL I FEEL ANYTHING?

You will feel no discomfort whilst treatment is taking place – the machine makes a noise but you feel and see nothing. Once you are positioned, the radiation therapists will leave the room to program the machine and computers.

You will be monitored on closed circuit television and there are microphones for communication if necessary. We encourage your family to watch your treatment at some stage, so there is better understanding of the daily activity.

Note: you are not radioactive whilst having radiotherapy and it is safe to be near children and pregnant women.

HOW WILL IT AFFECT MY DAILY LIVING?

You may continue your usual work and activities but you may experience some tiredness near the end of your course of treatment and in the weeks following.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS?

You may experience different degrees of these reactions, depending on the treatment site, the dose being given, the number of treatments, and the person's general health. Reactions will begin to occur within two to three weeks.

Skin reddening/irritation

Slight reddening of the skin can occur by the second or third week of treatment.

Towards the end of treatment the reaction can become more intense and the skin may break down. The radiotherapy nurse specialists will teach you how to care for this problem.

Occasionally this break down will occur in the week following the completion of your radiation therapy. Please contact our nurses by phone should this occur. The skin will improve slowly and may take up to three weeks following the completion of treatment.

See page 8 for skin care instructions.

Taste changes

Radiotherapy to the head and neck region may result in change, or loss of taste. This may also alter sense of smell. The dietitian will advise you on helpful measures to deal with these changes. Taste change usually improves two to three months after completion of your treatment.

Dry mouth

This is due to the radiation therapy and may occur as early as the first two weeks of treatment. The saliva becomes thick and sticky. Due to the dryness of the mouth, dentures may not 'adhere' to gums and poor fitting dentures may cause ulcers in the lining of the mouth. If you have problems with ill-fitting dentures, mention this to your dentist so he can make adjustments.

Mouth care consists of gentle cleaning of teeth, with regular mouth rinses using sodi-bicarb and salt mouth wash. Try not to use over the counter mouth rinse products as they can give a sensation of burning or irritate the mouth.

Moisturising gels and sprays can help with the dryness of your mouth – check with the nurses for appropriate products.

It is suggested that you have a bottle of water with you and sip regularly as necessary to keep the mouth comfortable.

Sodi-Bicarb Mouthwash Recipe

- 1 tablespoon bicarb. soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 4 cups of water

Make up daily and use after and between meals – at least five to six times per day.

Difficulty swallowing

This is the most common problem that occurs when radiotherapy is given to the head and neck area and occurs 2-3 weeks into the treatment course. Pain, dry mouth, hoarse voice and inflammation of the throat or gullet all add to this problem. Hoarse voice occurs when the voice box is in the treatment fields. If receiving chemotherapy at the same time, this may increase the reactions.

Early assessment by doctors, nurses or dieticians may help to prevent the progression of swallowing difficulties.

If you experience any of the above symptoms, please let a nurse know. There is medication available to treat these symptoms.

Pain and discomfort

the nurse will give you information about pain control, and your doctor will write prescriptions if required. It is important that you follow the pain control instructions, as this will ensure that you are best equipped to complete the radiation treatment.

Fatigue

You may become increasingly tired as you progress through the treatment. This is a normal reaction to radiotherapy and each person is affected in varying degrees. Finding a balance between rest and activity will help you cope with this side-effect.

WHAT SHOULD I DO FOR MY SKIN?

- A skin moisturiser will be given to you. Use at least TWICE DAILY from the commencement of your treatment then three to four times per day once your skin becomes pink.
- You may wash the treated skin with warm water and mild, unperfumed soap. Pat skin dry – do not rub.
- Do not use cosmetics or perfumes or other lotions on the treated area once you commence radiotherapy. These products may contain metals that can increase the skin irritation caused by radiation.
- Avoid wearing tight fitting clothes. Loose cotton t-shirts or singlets are best.
- Avoid exposure of the treated skin to excessive temperatures including direct sunlight, heat packs, ice packs, electric blankets, saunas or hot spas during the course of your radiotherapy.
- Avoid manual shaving with a razor – electric shavers are best for skin care.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Can I wash the marks off of my skin?

We ask that you don't deliberately wash them off as this may irritate your skin. The radiation therapists will re-apply them each day as required if they wear off.

What happens after my treatment is finished?

Your follow up arrangements will be discussed and organised by your treating doctor prior to completing your treatment.

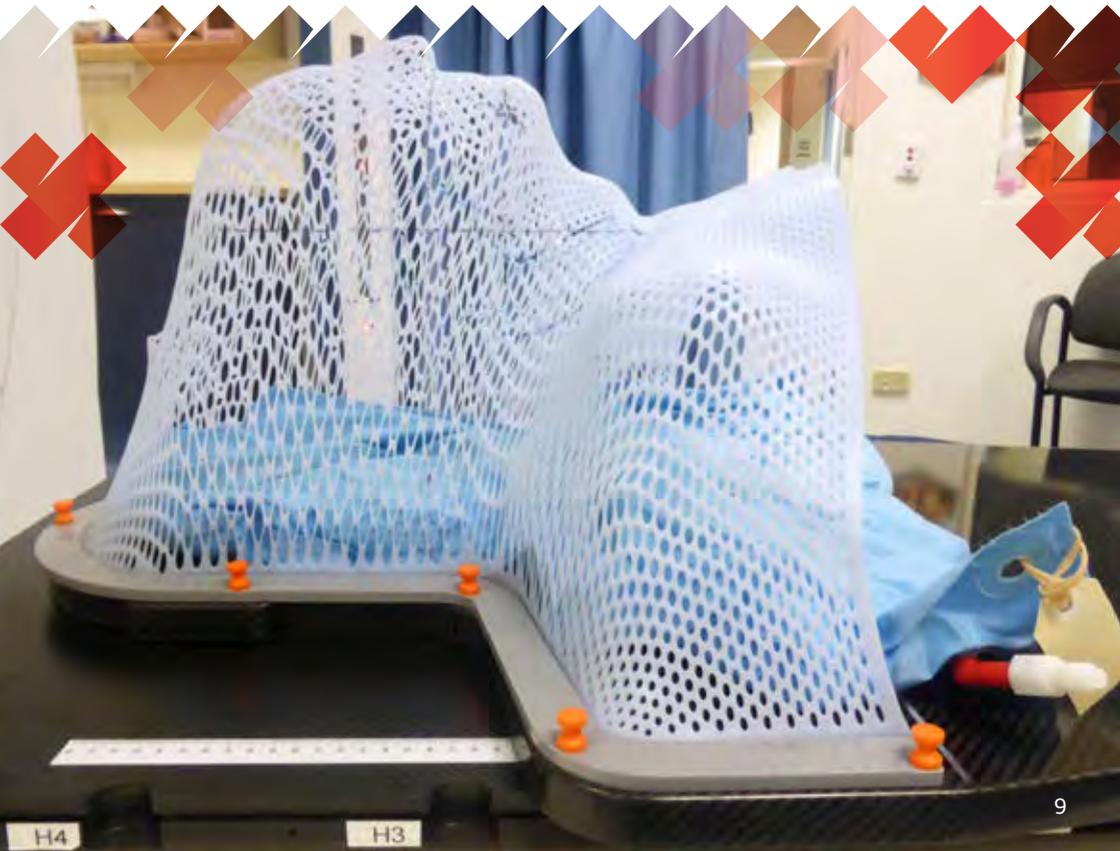
When do the side-effects settle?

The treatment keeps on working even though you have stopped coming in for treatment. Therefore you might find that symptoms get a little worse before they get better. Generally the side-effects will have settled within two to three weeks of finishing your treatment course.

REMEMBER

Experienced staff members are available to help you. The team in the radiotherapy unit consists of doctors, radiation therapists, nurse specialists, social workers, dieticians and pastoral care workers – they are here to help you resolve any concerns or problems you may have. Please do not hesitate to ask for help. Contact details are provided below.

Below: Mask used for treatment to the head and neck area.



PHONE CONTACTS

Radiotherapy Department Reception
03 4215 2600 (General Enquiries)

Radiotherapy Nurses' Desk
03 4215 2603

www.barwonhealth.org.au/cancer-services

