

Cancer services

Looking after your voice during radiotherapy for head and neck cancer

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Introduction

This leaflet explains how to look after your voice during your radiotherapy treatment. Please ask your speech and language therapist if you have any questions.

How does radiotherapy affect the voice?

Radiotherapy treats cancer by using high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells within the voice box (larynx) and/or throat (pharynx), while doing as little harm as possible to normal cells. Your voice may already be hoarse before you start the treatment. During your treatment you are likely to notice a change to the way your voice sounds. This is because radiotherapy damages the delicate surface of the vocal cords which stops them vibrating properly. The lining of your throat will also become sore and inflamed and it may feel too uncomfortable to speak

Some of the changes patients tell us about include:

- a more hoarse or croaky voice
- complete loss of voice or a voice that comes and goes
- having to strain the voice to be heard, or pain when trying to talk
- more secretions than usual which are thick and sticky
- needing to clear the throat frequently
- a dry or sore throat

What can I do to look after my voice?

It's very important to take care of your voice during the treatment to help it recover more quickly. Some of the ways you can do this are to:

- give up smoking – radiotherapy is more likely to be successful and the side effects more manageable if you can give up smoking before you start treatment
- drink plenty of water – the vocal cords need to be well hydrated to work well

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- inhale steam from a cup of plain hot water for 5 to 10 minutes each day
 - cut down on caffeine and stop drinking alcohol as these are dehydrating
 - avoid shouting or straining your voice when you speak as this can cause further damage or more problems after the treatment has finished. Use your voice quietly and gently and ask people to come closer to you if they cannot hear you
 - avoid clearing your throat harshly or excessively – take a sip of water instead

How long does it take for the voice to recover?

In most cases, the voice recovers in the first few weeks to months after radiotherapy has finished. For some people it may take longer. You may notice some mild changes to your voice following treatment, or that your voice does not sound exactly the same as before treatment. In a small number of cases, the voice changes continue for a long time after the treatment has finished. We can work with you to improve your voice and help you manage any long-term problems.

Voice therapy after radiotherapy

If your voice is causing you problems or you are concerned about it, we may recommend you have a short course of therapy. Voice therapy is very practical and involves making an individual plan of treatment that aims to improve the way you use your voice and how it feels. During your voice therapy sessions, we will:

- agree a therapy programme that is specific to your problem and meets your needs
- show you exercises and techniques that will help
- give you written advice and exercises to take home so you can practise in your own time

How do I find out more information?

If you have any questions, please contact the speech and language therapy service on **020 3331 0333**.

Further sources of support and information

Macmillan cancer navigator service at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust

This is a single point of contact for cancer patients at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, and their family, friends and carers. The service is here to help you to navigate your care and resolve queries that you may have. Our Navigators can access information about your appointments, connect you to appropriate services and signpost you on to further support. They can also book you in for a telephone call back from your clinical nurse specialist (CNS) if you have a question that needs clinical input.

The service is open Monday to Friday 08:30 to 16.30 excluding bank holidays. (The service is closed for training between 14.00- 14.45 on Thursdays.)

Call: **020 3313 0303**

Macmillan cancer information and support service at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust

The Macmillan cancer information and support service offers free support and information to anyone affected by cancer, including family and loved ones. The service has physical centres at Charing Cross and Hammersmith Hospitals, and also offers virtual and telephone support.

When you call or visit you can speak to one of the Macmillan cancer team one-on-one about whatever matters most to you. You can sign up to a range of weekly virtual groups that provide the opportunity to connect with other people with cancer in a relaxed environment. You can also speak to our Macmillan welfare and benefits adviser, who can offer patients of the Trust tailored advice on additional financial support.

The service is open Monday-Thursday (excluding bank holidays), with various drop-ins available within our physical centres. For more information please call us on **020 3313 5170** or email imperial.macmillansupportservice@nhs.net

Maggie's West London

Maggie's is a cancer charity that provides the emotional, practical and social support to people with cancer and their family and friends.

The centre offers a calming and beautiful space, a professional team of support staff, and the opportunity to talk and share with a community of people who have been through cancer too.

Maggie's centres are warm, friendly and informal places full of light and open space, with a big kitchen table at the heart of the building. Maggie's West London is located in the grounds of Charing Cross Hospital but is independent of our hospital.

The centre is open Monday to Friday, 09.00-17.00. For more information please call **020 7386 1750**.

Macmillan Support Line

The Macmillan Support Line offers confidential support to people living with cancer and their loved ones. This support line is a national line provided by Macmillan and is independent of our hospital.

The Support Line is open every day, 08:00 to 20:00. Please call: **0808 808 000** or visit www.macmillan.org.uk

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any suggestions or comments about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (PALS) on 020 3313 0088 (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or 020 3312 7777 (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at imperial.pals@nhs.net. The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to express your concerns in writing to:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street, London W2 1NY.

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print, as a sound recording, in Braille, or in alternative languages. Please contact the communications team on 020 3312 5592.

Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: www.imperial.nhs.uk

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