



# Radiotherapy in the Head & Neck area





# Contact Information

## Units in our group

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Visit us online at [www.cancersa.co.za](http://www.cancersa.co.za)

Treatment can be provided at any of the above locations, by the same Doctors within our group, whichever location may be more convenient to you.

Any appointment related enquiries can be made on the above numbers. In Pretoria, our administration teams are available from 08:00 until 16:30 and in Johannesburg our administration teams are available from 08:00 to 17:00.

**In case of a medical emergency outside of the above listed hours, contact our Oncologist on call at:**

If you are on treatment in Pretoria, please call: **(+27) 82 373 2148**

If you are on treatment in Johannesburg, please call: **(+27) 82 307 5565**

# What is Radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy uses controlled high energy x-rays to treat tumours and other diseases of the body. Radiation works by damaging the DNA of cells preventing them to divide and reproduce. Abnormal cancer cells are more sensitive to radiation because they divide more quickly than normal cells. Over time, the abnormal cells die, and the tumour shrinks. Normal cells can also be damaged by radiation, but they can repair themselves more effectively.

The goal of radiation therapy is to maximize the dose to abnormal cells while minimizing exposure to normal cells. The effects of radiation are not immediate; the treatment benefit occurs over time.

Radiation therapy is painless and will not make you radioactive.

Radiation is often given with the intent of destroying the tumour and curing the disease (curative treatment). However, not all disease or cancer can be cured with radiation. Sometimes radiation is used to relieve symptoms, such as pain (palliative treatment).

Radiation therapy is delivered with a linear accelerator (LINAC) as shown in the picture below.



# What happens next?

After the planning scan is done the pre-treatment process must follow. This is a multi-disciplinary process and can take up to several working days to ensure that optimal and precise treatment is given.

This is a timeous process so please be patient.

Once all these processes are completed you will receive a phone call with your first treatment date and time.

Appointment times are subjected to availability, but we will try to accommodate you to the best of our abilities.

If you are late for your appointment, please understand that we are working according to a schedule and will treat patients that are on time first. You will be attended to as soon as an opening is available.

On the first day of treatment you will receive a schedule with **all** your treatment appointments. Please be here 10 minutes before the scheduled time.

The radiotherapists assess you every day on which you receive treatment, so please tell them if you have any difficulties or queries. They can offer you considerable advice.

During your course of treatment, you will see your radiation oncologist once a week. If he/she is not available for any reason one of the other doctors in the practice can see you if necessary.

During your first week of treatment you will also see our counsellor for a **free** counselling session. We encourage every patient to make use of this service. Battling cancer is tough. It may help to join a support group and seek out help from family or friends.

After your treatment is completed you must make a 2 week follow up appointment with your radiation oncologist. This is still part of the treatment and will not have any extra charges.

# Possible side effects

All patients differ, so please do not compare yourself to others.

During your treatment you may experience irritation, dryness or itchiness of the skin as well as other side-effects as listed below.

You should try the following advice from the start of your treatment until 2 weeks after the radiotherapy is completed.

- ❖ Aqueous cream (no colourants or scents) may be used on treatment area.
- ❖ Yellow vaseline or Jelonet Paraffin gauze dressings can be used in treatment areas to lessen friction and soothe skin.
- ❖ Treat the skin exposed to radiation with special care. Avoid hot/cold packs and only use lotions and ointments after checking with the radiotherapists.
- ❖ Protect the skin being treated from sun exposure throughout radiotherapy. Do not apply sunscreen on treated skin.
- ❖ You can gently wash the treatment area with plain dove soap or baby shampoo without rubbing it vigorously or using too hot water.
- ❖ No shaving/waxing of facial hair during treatment. This may cause more irritation to the skin. You can shave with an electric shaver once a week.
- ❖ Temporary hair loss may occur only in the area being treated.
- ❖ When treating over the mouth area redness, irritation, and sores can occur in your mouth making the mouth dry and sore with thickened saliva/phlegm. Change/loss of taste can also occur due to this side effect and can last up to 3 months after treatment is completed before getting back to normal.

- ❖ Difficulty and pain when swallowing can occur if treating over neck area.
- ❖ Avoid alcohol and smoking as this may worsen side effects.
- ❖ Change in voice may occur along with swelling of voice box and hoarseness.
- ❖ Dental care is an essential part of preparing for radiotherapy. Ask your radiation oncologist whether you need to see your dentist before starting treatment.
- ❖ Oral hygiene is very important to lessen the risk of mouth infections and tooth decay. You can gargle with a solution of 1litre water, 1t bicarbonate of soda and 1t salt as much as you like. You can use a mild toothpaste with a soft bristle toothbrush twice daily.
- ❖ Weight loss is likely due to possible side effects. You will be weighed weekly during your treatment.
- ❖ Nutrition is very important, try to eat small but frequent soft meals. Let your doctor/therapist know if you have trouble swallowing and eating, they might be able to provide you with some helpful suggestions and/or medication.
- ❖ Supplements such as Ensure (mixed with water not milk) can be used as frequently as possible to sustain energy and wellbeing.
- ❖ Advise your doctor about any medications or vitamins you are taking, to make sure they are safe to use during radiotherapy.

During your treatment you can continue eating, drinking and exercising as normal.

