

A Patient's Guide to  
Radioiodine treatment  
for Thyroid Cancer at  
Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

Patient Information Series No 15

### **Consent**

It is a legal requirement to have a signed Consent Form from you before the start of your treatment.

If you have already been given one of these forms, please bring the completed form with you when you come for your first appointment.

If you have not been given a form, this will be discussed with you at your first appointment.

### **Identification**

Please note that it is a legal requirement for the staff to check your name and details against your treatment sheet and your hospital name band each time you attend.

You must wear your name band at all times whilst in hospital.

This leaflet has been written by the staff in the Medical Physics (Nuclear Medicine) Department, in collaboration with oncologists & health care professionals at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre, as well as patients and carers at the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre.

If you have difficulty reading this size of print, a version of this leaflet or any of our leaflets can be produced for you in a larger print.

# A Patient's Guide to Radioiodine treatment for Thyroid Cancer at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

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## Introduction

This leaflet is written for patients who are being offered radioiodine treatment for thyroid cancer. Whilst it cannot deal with every issue, we hope it will answer some of the most commonly asked questions.

However, if anything in this leaflet is unclear, please refer to the contact number on page 11 and the staff will be pleased to help you.

## What is radioiodine therapy?

Radioiodine is radioactive; this means that it releases radiation into the site in the body where it is absorbed. As the thyroid gland needs iodine in order to work, it attracts any iodine in your body.

This provides a very convenient way to get the radioiodine to the place it is needed for the most effective treatment.

Radioiodine therapy is often used as an additional treatment after the surgery to remove the thyroid gland. If there is any thyroid tissue left after the surgery, it will take up (absorb) the radioiodine and the radiation will stop it working.

## Where is the treatment given?

The treatment is given at Mount Vernon Hospital in either ward 10 or ward 11, where you will need to be an inpatient for about 3 to 5 days.

A member of staff from the Medical Physics Department will come to your room on the ward to give you your treatment.

## **Will I have to sign a consent form?**

Yes, as with all medical procedures, you will be asked to sign a form giving your consent for this treatment. It is very important that you understand what you are giving consent to, so if you are concerned or unclear about any aspects of this treatment, please ask the team treating you. They will be pleased to explain.

## **What about pregnancy and breast-feeding?**

As with all procedures involving radiation, you should not undergo treatment if you are pregnant. You must tell the staff if there is any possibility whatsoever of you being pregnant, and you will be asked to sign a consent form to that effect. Also you must not have this treatment if you are breast-feeding.

You are advised not to become pregnant for 6 months following the treatment. For men who have been given radioiodine therapy, we also recommend that you do not father a child for 4 months following the treatment.

## **What must I do to prepare for treatment?**

Before you are admitted, you must stop certain medications and follow the dietary instructions below.

### **Medications:**

At your initial consultation the doctor will advise you about your medication, and you will receive a letter confirming this.

### **Dietary instructions:**

A diet that is rich in iodine may reduce the effectiveness of the treatment. Therefore we recommend you follow a low iodine diet:

- [a] For 2 weeks before (and 24 hours after) taking your radioiodine capsule:
  - Do eat fresh meat, vegetables, fresh fruit, pasta and rice (these are low in iodine).
  - Do not eat any fish, seafood, kelp, fish-oil tablets and iodised salt.
  - Stop taking 'over the counter' medicines such as cough mixtures, vitamin tablets and complementary medicines which contain iodine. If in doubt read the labels or check with the pharmacist.
  - Avoid food that is artificially coloured red using E127 which is rich in iodine. This is in glacé and maraschino cherries. Food coloured by spices is allowed.

**x** Dairy products contain some iodine, so cut down on egg yolk, cheese, butter, yoghurt, milk and milk products. You do not have to cut these out altogether but have as little as you can.

[b] For 4 hours before your treatment:

You may drink water, black tea or coffee but it is very important that you do not eat anything for at least 4 hours before your treatment.

[c] For 24 hours after your treatment:

Continue to avoid all the food / medications mentioned in [a] above.

If your hospital doctor wants you to restrict your diet for a longer period of time before your treatment, you will be told.

### **Are there any side effects from this treatment?**

There are not usually many unpleasant side-effects from this treatment. Occasionally a patient will get a sore throat but this should last for only a few days. If it does happen to you, drink plenty of fluids and tell a member of the ward staff who will ask your doctor to prescribe something soothing for your throat.

Sometimes patients develop inflammation of the salivary glands and a dry mouth. This can happen a few days or even months after the treatment. These side-effects usually settle down after a few days.

### **How is treatment given?**

The treatment is usually given as a small capsule which is about the same size as an antibiotic capsule. You will be given some water to help you swallow it and a hot drink afterwards to enable it to dissolve in your stomach.

You will be encouraged to drink plenty of fluids during the 48 hours following the treatment, and will be asked to pass urine frequently. This will flush the excess radioactive iodine out of your system.

Water is provided but you may bring your own drinks with you if you wish. Occasionally the radioiodine may be given as a drink which is colourless and tasteless.

### **Will I be radioactive after the treatment?**

Yes, during the first 24 hours after the treatment some of the radioiodine is taken up by any remaining thyroid tissue. The rest is excreted from your body, mostly through your urine but also through your saliva, sweat and faeces.

For this reason there are certain precautions to take that will reduce the radiation dose to other people.

It is important to restrict the length of time that you are in close proximity to other people. We also encourage you to observe a high level of personal hygiene to avoid the spread of contamination.

## Whilst you are in hospital

While you are in hospital receiving this treatment, the staff looking after you will wear additional protective clothing, such as aprons, gloves and overshoes. They will spend only short periods of time in your room, because of the nature of your treatment.

They may stand behind a lead screen and you should try to remain on the opposite side of the room. Please do not expect them to stay and chat for long periods of time, but do contact them if you need anything.

The room you will stay in on the ward is purpose built for radioiodine patients and to make your stay easier, it has special facilities to help you. These include:

- ◇ A colour television / dvd / digibox
- ◇ A private bathroom and toilet
- ◇ A fridge
- ◇ A telephone

You will have to stay in this room for the complete length of your treatment. Visitors are not allowed except under special circumstances by prior arrangement with the Medical Physics Department.

If allowed, any visitors must report to the nurse in charge when they arrive. Pregnant women and children under 18 years must not visit you.

The room has a telephone with a direct line enabling you to receive calls from family and friends. The telephone numbers of the rooms dedicated to radioiodine treatment are listed below. Please give the appropriate number to your family and friends so they can call you.

Ward 10:	Robert Dixon Room:	01923 844060
Ward 11:	Odette Churchill Room:	01923 844206

It is possible for you to make calls from the telephone in your room, but please note that you will be charged for these calls.

It is important that nothing is taken out of your room. Your meals will be brought to you on disposable paper plates and you will be asked to wash the cutlery yourself.

You may bring in items such as videos, tapes and books, but they will have to be monitored for contamination before you take them home with you. It is advisable to bring in a separate change of clothes and shoes which can be kept for wearing home.

## How long will I have to stay in hospital?

You will usually have to stay in hospital from 3 to 5 days, depending on how much of the iodine your thyroid tissue absorbs.

The staff from the Medical Physics Department will come to your room every day to take measurements. They can then work out how much radioactivity is still in your body and if the level is safe for you to go home. You will have to stay in the iodine room until that time.

Before going home you may have a scan in the Medical Physics Department (Nuclear Medicine).

In this simple procedure you will lie on a couch and we will use a special camera to look at where the radioiodine has been absorbed.

## **Will I have restrictions when I get home?**

Yes. At home you will need to take some precautions to protect other people, especially children and pregnant women.

The staff will discuss these with you and give you written instructions explaining the restrictions and how long they apply in your case. This is typically one week, but can be longer for contact with children and pregnant women.

However as this varies from one patient to another, you will be told, before you go home, the exact number of days that the restrictions apply in your case. You need to:

- ◇ Avoid contact with pregnant women and children. If you have small children who need constant attention, then you may need someone else to look after them for the appropriate length of time. They don't have to be sent away – if someone else can attend to them, they can still see you, but will need to be kept at a distance from you for the restricted time.
- ◇ Avoid prolonged close contact with other people for example, at home if you are watching the television don't sit beside anyone, sit in a separate chair.
- ◇ You should not share your bed with another person and you should abstain from sexual intercourse and open mouth kissing.
- ◇ Avoid places of entertainment such as the cinema or restaurants where you are close to other people for periods of more than one hour.
- ◇ Avoid dental appointments and non-urgent visits to the GP (family doctor).

- ◇ Wash the clothes you used in the hospital separately from the rest of the family wash.
- ◇ Avoid journeys on public transport exceeding one hour, journeys by air will always take longer and must be avoided. Please be aware that some security scanners at airports, railway stations etc. may be so sensitive that they may be able to detect that you have had radioiodine treatment months after your treatment.

Before you go home you will be given a yellow sheet with details of your treatment - you should carry this with you for six months.

## **Will I have to stay off work after the treatment?**

Although the treatment will not make you feel ill, you will have to stay off work for a few days because of the radioactivity passing through your body. However, if you work with children or pregnant women this length of time will be increased.

The Medical Physics staff at the hospital will explain how long you must stay away from work. These arrangements are made in order to be absolutely safe and should not cause you or anybody around you any anxiety.

## **When will I know how the treatment has worked?**

The treatment works slowly over a period of weeks. Usually you will be given a follow-up appointment for a radioiodine whole body scan about 4-6 months after the treatment.

## **Will I have to have more than one treatment?**

Some patients will have more than one treatment. A radioiodine whole body scan is used to determine the effectiveness of the treatment and identify whether further therapy will be needed.

The doctor in charge of your treatment will see the results of your scan, and you will be contacted regarding any further treatment, or any other medication, or for an out-patient appointment.

## **Are there any long-term effects?**

There are usually no long-term effects from the radioactivity from the iodine. As this radioiodine treatment aims to stop your thyroid gland from working, it will stop it from producing any more thyroid hormone.

This means that this hormone will need to be replaced, which can be very easily managed with thyroxine tablets, and all this will be thoroughly explained to you.

## **Can I change my appointment once made?**

The radioiodine has to be ordered specially for each patient when the appointment is booked, and the special room on the ward has to be booked weeks in advance.

It would be appreciated if any unavoidable cancellation or rearrangement could be made at least three weeks before your appointment date.

Obviously, we will understand if there are circumstances such as illnesses which are beyond your control.

Please remember if you have any questions at all, please contact the Medical Physics Department (Nuclear Medicine) and we will do our best to help and advise you.

Medical Physics Department (Nuclear Medicine):

01923 844081

Mon - Fri: 8.30am – 4.30pm

Mount Vernon Cancer Centre is based at:  
Mount Vernon Hospital, Rickmansworth Road,  
Northwood, Middlesex. HA6 2RN.

A map of Mount Vernon Hospital can be found on the website: [www.ljmc.org](http://www.ljmc.org)

This leaflet forms part of a series of publications produced by the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC).

If you would like further information about any aspect of cancer and its treatments, please drop in to the centre or call the Helpline.

The LJMC is staffed by healthcare professionals and trained volunteers and is part of the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

- ◇ Drop-in centre for support and information
- ◇ Telephone Helpline
- ◇ Benefits Advice \*
- ◇ Pre-treatment visits
- ◇ Complementary therapies \*
- ◇ Relaxation classes
- ◇ Counselling \*
- ◇ Support groups
- ◇ Look Good...Feel Better™ beauty workshops

\* These services are available to patients under the care of an NHS oncologist based at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

Opening hours: Mon - Fri: 9.30am - 1.00pm & 2.00 - 4.30pm

Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre  
situated between the Cancer Centre and Gate 3 (White Hill)  
Mount Vernon Hospital, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 2RN  
Telephone Helpline: **01923 844014**  
[www.ljmc.org](http://www.ljmc.org)