



TRANSCRIPT:

Preparing for radiotherapy Part 2b: Side effects of external beam radiotherapy

In this video we're going to talk about:

- The possible side effects of external beam radiotherapy
- And we'll hear perspectives from people who have been through external beam radiotherapy for womb cancer and their recommendations for how to get through it

External beam radiotherapy causes more side effects than brachytherapy. These side effects can include:

- Fatigue or tiredness
- Changes to your bowel, bladder, and vagina
- Anaemia, which means you have a low red blood cell count, and that you may need a blood transfusion
- Thinning of the bones in the pelvis that can lead to fractures

Often these side effects settle after the treatment course has finished, but for some people, they can persist longer term. For others, side effects can develop months or even years after the treatment has been given.

We asked people who've been through radiotherapy for womb cancer to tell us about their experience, and what advice they would give someone having radiotherapy.

[Possible side effects during external beam radiotherapy]

I found that I got very fatigued, especially as the treatment went on. Obviously, you're going every day, and you may have to travel some way. And of course, then you are there for a while because of having preparation to have your bladder full and to make your bowel empty.

I think, probably two weeks into the treatment, I started with very loose stools, having to dash to the toilet in the evening. But this was short-term, and this was manageable as the radiographers prescribed me things to help with this.

I had bladder irritation that felt like cystitis and when I mentioned this to the radiographers, they assured me that this was quite common, and they checked that I didn't have a urine infection. However, it was just the radiotherapy causing the irritation when I passed urine. I just made sure that I drank plenty of water.

[Possible side effects after external beam radiotherapy]

I first started noticing some swelling in my, in one of my legs, when I was actually having the radiotherapy and because you get to see the consultant during each week, during your radiotherapy, I mentioned this.

And then there was a whole list of things that I really needed to avoid, or to do. They actually referred me to a lymphoedema nurse, which is actually, she's based at our, our local hospice, which is, is really great. So, nice and local.

And she gives me lots of advice, and I actually wear some compression garments to my legs – most of the time, especially when the swelling comes up. And she's taught me how to do some lymphatic drainage, some, some massage to my legs, to keep the swelling down, to keep the circulation good. And, to give me, and she's given me lots of advice of what to do and what not to do. Yeah, so, that's ongoing but they're, they're looking after me really well.

I think for me with radiotherapy, the ongoing effect has been to my bowel. So, like I mentioned, I'd had diarrhoea with chemotherapy and then I went into radiotherapy, and I suppose I thought that once I'd finished treatment, you know, give it, give it a little while then hopefully my bowel, although I'd been told perhaps a slight change in bowel habit, that it would get back to something like normal, but it didn't.

And I was also had a bit of bleeding as well, which given I'd gone through a cancer diagnosis, was this related to the cancer treatment, or could this be something more serious?

So, to me, that was a red flag – got back in touch with GP, the gynae oncology team, who at that point referred me the gastroenterology team, and through all of that it's been having to deal with the ongoing bowel issues. In terms of the bleeding, that was resolved pretty quickly - fortunately, not cancer-related – that, that was just down to the treatment, but a solution to it so it could be treated.

And I think that has just been the fact of just dealing with the ongoing bowel issue and just finding a solution to resolving that, so that it doesn't perhaps affect my life in the way that it could do, if, if it went unresolved.

I do have, unfortunately, ongoing, sort of, bowel issues, urgency, needing to get to the toilet. And some, and bladder irritation still, yeah. I do get those, but, managing them okay.

And along with that, I, I had some pain, my back, in my sacral area, and it got quite intense. So, I mentioned it to my gynaecologist at a meeting that I had with him, and he ordered an MRI scan, which they found some insufficiency fractures to my sacrum. Obviously, they, they were checking to make sure there had been no recurrence, which was the main concern.

So, these are like little, tiny hair-like fractures that I've have in my sacrum. I'd had a few since finishing treatment, but I was referred to a physio. I do exercises to keep everything strong, and just take, you know, over-the-counter painkillers if, if I need to.

[Where can I find further information and support?]

There's more information about radiotherapy on our website, including a checklist of things to take with you during treatment, put together by our Peaches community. You can also go to our video titled, 'Accessing support and information', and you can find a list of organisations on the website that provide helpful support and information.