

# **THYROID CANCER**

## **Patient Information Book 3**

### **THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RADIO-IODINE TREATMENT**

## **What does Radioactive Iodine treatment consist of ?**

Treatment usually involves having an ablation dose of radioactive iodine in the form of a capsule/tablet which destroys any remaining normal thyroid tissue. Patients are then further scanned using radioactive iodine (see information booklet 1) to assess if there are any remaining thyroid cells. If there are then a further therapy dose of radioactive iodine is usually administered. Very occasionally, more than one therapy dose is required.

### **Is Radioactive Iodine Treatment safe?**

The greatest danger from radioactive iodine is to the thyroid gland but since your thyroid has been removed, there is no great danger; the treatment is meant to destroy any thyroid cells that may have escaped surgical removal. There has been extensive research into this method of treatment. While no one would say that any treatment is 100% safe, the increased risk of developing other cancers following treatment are very small and applies to the use of larger doses than is usual for thyroid cancer treatment. If you are unsure or have any questions please talk it through with your specialist consultant or a member of the treatment team.

The precautions which are described below are intended to protect other people, who still have a thyroid, pregnant women and young children. It makes sense to reduce everyone's exposure to radioactivity, as any one of us may need this form of treatment in the future.

### **Are there any side effects from Radioactive Iodine Treatment?**

Some patients may experience a feeling of tightness in the throat and/or feel flushed, which usually lasts for no more than 24 hours. If this persists please inform the nursing staff. An anti-inflammatory drug can be given to alleviate this problem.

Some patients may lose their taste slightly. This can happen a few weeks after the treatment and should only last a few days. Drinking plenty of water and sucking citrus fruit sweets after the treatment helps to wash out your salivary glands and reduces this problem.

Please do talk through any of your questions with the specialist consultant or a member of the treatment team.

### **What if I am pregnant?**

It is very important that you do not have Radioactive Iodine Treatment if you are pregnant or think there is a good chance that you may be, please let your medical staff know if you are unsure before you have any treatment. It is important not to plan for a family when having investigations for thyroid cancer. You should use a reliable contraceptive until all treatment has finished and you have had the go ahead from your specialist consultant. Long term your fertility should not be affected but there may be a small risks if repeated Radioactive Iodine Therapy is needed.

### **(Male patients) Will it affect my ability to have children?**

Male patients are advised not to try for children (get their partners pregnant) for a certain period of time following Radioactive Iodine Treatment and until they are sure they will not need any further Radioactive Iodine Treatment. Long term your fertility should not be

affected but there may be a small risks if repeated Radioactive Iodine Treatment is needed. Please discuss this with your specialist consultant or a member of the treatment team before trying for a family following this treatment: specialist advice and help is available.

### **Before having Radioactive Iodine Treatment what medication/tablets should I take?**

If you are taking T3 tablets most specialist centres recommend these should be stopped around 2 weeks before your Radioactive Iodine Treatment

If you are on T4 tablets most specialist centres will advise you to stop taking them for 4 weeks before the Radioactive Iodine Treatment. In this 4 week period your specialist may first change you to T3 tablets for 2 weeks, and then stop your tablets altogether for the last 2 weeks before your treatment. You are likely to feel weak and tired when you are not taking your tablets. This is normal and will disappear once you start taking them again. This is usually a few days after you have had your radioiodine.

**IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS REGARDING STOPPING YOUR THYROXINE MEDICATION GIVEN TO YOU BY YOUR SPECIALIST CENTRE STAFF, AS IT MAY VARY A LITTLE NATIONALLY. PLEASE CONTACT YOUR SPECIALIST CENTRE IF YOU ARE UNSURE ONE MONTH BEFORE YOUR PLANNED DATE OF STARTING RADIOACTIVE TREATMENT REGARDING THYROXINE MEDICATION.**

### **Should I keep taking my other medication/tablets?**

If you are taking any other tablets you should carry on doing so and bring a supply with you on admission and show them to the doctor and nurse team. If you are taking any vitamin or mineral supplements or cod liver oil stop taking them around three weeks before your therapy to help reduce your iodine levels.

### **Before my Radioactive Iodine Treatment what should I eat?**

A diet which is rich in iodine can reduce the effectiveness of the treatment. Therefore three weeks before coming in to hospital we recommend the following:

**Do eat** fresh meat, vegetables, fresh fruit, pasta and rice. These are low in iodine.

**Do not eat** foods artificially coloured pink or red such as canned and glace cherries, canned strawberries, spam, salami, certain pastries and sweets. The colouring material E127 is rich in iodine so look on the labels when buying food. Food coloured by spices is allowed.

**Do not take** cough medicine, iodised table salt, or sea salt as these contain iodine.

**Try to cut down on** dairy produce such as eggs, cheese, milk and milk products, as they all contain some iodine.

**Avoid** fish, kelp and all seafood.

Also avoid vitamin supplements which contain iodine.

## **Do I have to come into hospital for Radioactive Iodine Treatment?**

Yes, you will probably need to stay in hospital for three to four days. How soon you go home depends on how quickly the radioactivity leaves your body.

## **What happens on admission?**

On the ward the ward clerk usually greets you at the main ward reception area or office and registers your details. You will then be issued with a hospital name band with your hospital registration number and a few details on it to wear. One of the nursing staff will take your blood pressure, pulse and temperature as a routine procedure.

You will be given an explanation of the treatment and details about the room you will be staying in.

You will have the opportunity to ask any questions that you might have.

Your doctor will then come to examine you and check that you have stopped taking your thyroid tablets prior to the treatment, as this interferes with the absorption of the radioactive iodine. You will have been sent information regarding this with your appointment letter.

## **Who gives the Capsule?**

The Nuclear Medicine (or Medical Physics) department within the hospital is responsible for dealing with the radioiodine treatment. One of their staff will come to the ward to give you the capsule. The capsule is about the size of an antibiotic capsule.

## **What happens next?**

For the first two hours after taking the capsule you should refrain from eating and drinking, as this allows time for the iodine to be absorbed.

After this time you should eat as normal and drink as much as possible and use the toilet frequently. This will flush the excess radioactive iodine out of your system.

## **Are there any restrictions?**

As the treatment you have received is radioactive no young children or pregnant women are allowed to visit. Others may visit for short time. Because you are *radioactive*, staff will spend only short periods of time in your room. When they bring in your meals and drinks they may stand behind a lead screen and you should try to remain on the opposite side of the room. Do not expect them to stay and chat for long periods of time but do not hesitate to contact them if you need anything.

### **What happens at mealtimes?**

The nursing staff will bring you meals in your room. These meals may be served on paper plates and you may need to use plastic cutlery. When you have finished your meal these should be disposed of in a bin provided. If there is any unwanted food this needs to be sealed in a plastic bag and disposed of in the bin. Alternatively, if ordinary plates and cutlery are used you will have to wash up and keep them in your room. A waste disposal unit may be available to dispose of any unwanted food. Each day you will receive a menu to fill in for the next day. Drinks are provided in the morning, mid-morning, lunch time, tea time and night time.

If you do not receive your meal for whatever reason please ring the nurses station, who will provide you with one. We will try our best to ensure this does not happen.

### **What self washing/hygiene should I do?**

As you should be drinking a lot, you should also be using the toilet frequently. All your bodily fluids are radioactive so you must flush the toilet after use. If you spill or splash urine please contact the nursing staff.

Your sweat is also radioactive, so we advise you take a shower daily. This may sound a little strange and alarming at first but please remember this is very low dose radiation and it is for your treatment and long term recovery. You will soon be free of radiation and back home.

### **Are there any other items I can bring in with me to help me relax or pass the time?**

You may have brought videos, cassettes, books, clothes and toiletries with you. These items may need to be monitored for contamination before they can be removed from your room. It may sometimes be necessary for us to keep some of your belongings if they are contaminated. They will be returned to you once they are no longer contaminated.

### **When can I go home?**

The staff from Nuclear Medicine or Medical Physics will come to the ward to take measurements and you will go to their department for a whole body scan. The staff can then work out how much radiation is still in your body and if you are at a safe level to go home. You must stay in the iodine room until you go home.

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

The nuclear medicine staff will explain to you the restrictions you must observe when you go home, for example avoiding crowded places and limiting the people you come into contact with. They can work out exactly how many days you need to restrict yourself. The restrictions you are given may vary from other patients as some patients may be lower or higher in their radioactivity. You will be at an acceptable level to go home.

Nursing staff will organise a new supply of thyroid tablets for you to take home and the date to restart them.

### **Will I have to come back to the hospital?**

You will need to be seen again in the outpatient department by your doctor. You will either be given an appointment when you leave the ward, or this may be sent to you later.

When everything is organised and your transport arrives you are free to go home.

### **Will I need Radioactive Iodine Treatment again?**

The treatment may need to be repeated until all the remaining thyroid tissue has been destroyed. Most people only require one ablation dose and a few people require a further therapy dose or two.

**Please remember that this is a very low dose of radiation and all these procedures are to protect you and others in case they should need to have radiation treatment in the future. The aim is to keep everybody's exposure to a minimum.**

**Please contact your Specialist Treatment Centre Staff if you have any questions or concerns after reading this Information book. Together we can help you through your investigations, treatment and recovery.**

### **Useful Contact Numbers**

#### **The British Thyroid Foundation**

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Clifford

Wetherby

West Yorkshire

LS23 6XD

tel no: 0113-392-4600

Paul@pnevns.freerve.co.uk

**Macmillan Information Line** 0845 601 6161

**Cancerlink Freephone Information Helpline** 0800 132905

Asian language line 0171 713 786

**Cancer BACUP** 0800 800 1234 [www.cancerbacup.org.uk](http://www.cancerbacup.org.uk)

**CancerHelp UK** <http://medweb.bham.ac.uk/cancerhelp>