

Patient Information Set 3

Radioactive iodine ablation therapy

Things you need to know

What is radioactive iodine ablation?

This form of treatment consists of swallowing radioactive iodine, either as a capsule or a liquid. The iodine is taken up by the thyroid gland. The very small dose of radiation is then concentrated in the thyroid cells and destroys them.

Is radioactive iodine therapy safe?

Radioactive iodine has been used to treat thyroid cancer for over 50 years and is extremely safe. The greatest danger from radioactive iodine is to the thyroid gland, but as your thyroid has been removed it is not at risk; 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, there is very little increased risk of developing other cancers, and this very small risk applies to the use of doses larger than are 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, particularly 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 therapy.

Most patients do not have 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 relieve this problem.

Some patients may lose their sense of taste slightly. This can happen a few weeks after the treatment and should last only 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 or breast feeding?

It is very important that you **do not have radioactive iodine therapy 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 become pregnant 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. In the long term your fertility will not be affected, though there may be a small risk if repeated doses of radioactive iodine therapy are needed.

If you are breast feeding, you should stop this before you have the radioactive iodine treatment.

*(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 therapy**. In the long term your fertility should not be affected, but there may be a small risk if repeated radioactive iodine therapy 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 therapy what medication/tablets should I take?

If you are taking **T3 tablets**, most specialist centres recommend these should be stopped for **two weeks** before your radioactive iodine therapy.

If you are on **T4 tablets**, most specialist centres will advise you to stop taking them for **four weeks** before the radioactive iodine therapy. In this four-week period your specialist may first change you to T3 tablets for two weeks, and then stop your tablets altogether for the last two 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 usually will be 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 in different centres. Please contact your specialist centre at least one month before your planned date for radioactive iodine therapy if you are unsure about your thyroxine medication.

Should I keep taking my other medication/tablets?

If you are taking any other tablets you should carry on doing so. 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 therapy 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.
- **Avoid** vitamin supplements which contain iodine.

Some low-iodine recipes can be found at www.thyca.org.

Do I have to come into hospital for radioactive iodine therapy.

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 you will be greeted and your details will be registered. You will then be issued with a hospital name band to wear, with your hospital registration number and a few details on it. 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.

You will be asked to sign a form giving consent for the treatment.

Who gives the capsule:

The Nuclear Medicine (or Medical Physics) Department within the hospital is responsible for dealing with the radioactive iodine treatment. One of their staff will come to the ward to give you the capsule (which is about the size of an antibiotic capsule), or the liquid (which is colourless and tasteless).

What happens next:

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

After this time you should eat as normal and drink as much as possible so that you pass urine 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 a 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 these will have to be washed up either in your room, or in a special kitchen. 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 and they 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 bath or 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 can bring 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 the Nuclear Medicine or Medical Physics Department will come to the ward to take measurements, and they can then work out how much radiation is still in your body and if the level is safe for you to go home. You must stay in the iodine room until that time. Before going home you will have a whole body scan.

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 number of people you come into contact with. They can work out exactly over how many days you will need to restrict yourself. The restrictions you are given may differ from other patients as some patients may be lower or higher in their radioactivity. Your radioactivity will be at an acceptable level when you go home. These restrictions are to protect other people, especially pregnant women and children.

Nursing staff will organise a new supply of thyroid tablets for you to take home and you will be told when 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 you are free to go home.

Will I need radioactive iodine therapy again?

The treatment may need to be repeated until all the remaining thyroid tissue has been destroyed. Some people require one ablation dose while some people require more than one treatment.

Please remember that this is a very low dose of radiation and all these procedures are to protect you and others in case they 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. Together we can help you through your investigations, treatment and recovery.

Useful contacts

The British Thyroid Foundation

PO Box 97, Clifford, Wetherby, West Yorkshire LS23 6XD

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

CancerHelp UK

<http://medweb.bham.ac.uk/cancerhelp>

Thyroid Cancer Survivors' Association

www.thyca.org

Other useful sites can be found on the **BTA links page**

www.british-thyroid-association.org