

Information for carers of patients receiving ¹³¹I radioiodine treatment

Why have I received this information?

As the patient's carer, you are likely to have considerable close contact with the patient in the time after their treatment. Since the treatment involves a radioactive substance, and the patient effectively becomes a source of radiation, you may receive a radiation dose that is higher than the normal annual limit for a member of the public. It is acceptable for you to exceed this limit if you are willing to be considered as a "comforter or carer" and be exposed to the small additional risk which comes with the increased exposure to radiation. This information sheet explains the additional risk to you by taking on this role.

Why is there an annual limit to radiation dose?

Any exposure to radiation is believed to increase the risk of getting cancer later in life. Radiation dose limits are set to reduce this risk to an absolute minimum. The annual dose limit for a member of the public is 1 mSv over and above the background radiation dose. An additional 1 mSv dose gives an increased risk of 1 in 20,000 of inducing cancer later in life. This is a very small additional risk when 1 in 3 people will contract cancer at some time.

How much radiation do I normally receive?

On average every person in the UK receives approximately 2.5 mSv of background radiation per year. This means that the annual dose limit is less than half the dose you receive due to background radiation each year. Background radiation levels vary across the UK and in some areas are as high as 7mSv – there is no increased incidence of cancer in these areas.

How much radiation will I receive from the patient having this treatment?

The dose you will receive depends on how much close contact you have with the patient. It has been estimated that you will receive between 1 mSv and 5 mSv from caring for the patient. If you were to receive a full 5 mSv dose (it will not be measured) it increases your chance of contracting cancer by 1 in 4,000.

What do I need to do to minimise the risk?

The dose you receive depends on how close you are to the patient (the closer you are the greater the dose) and how long you are close to the patient (the longer you are with them the greater the dose).

You should try to keep at least one metre (about 3 feet) away from the patient whenever possible. Inevitably you will need to have short periods of close contact to care for the patient but these should be kept as short as possible.

You should be familiar with the information provided for patients having radioiodine treatment and try to ensure that the precautions described are followed

What if I am pregnant?

If there is any chance that you are pregnant then you cannot act as a comforter and carer and alternative arrangements will have to be made.

Who do I contact for more advice?

For more information, contact the Department of Medical Physics, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh on 0131 5372155.