Radioactive iodine treatment as an outpatient

This leaflet explains the procedure for having radioactive iodine treatment as an outpatient and the precautions you need to take. It aims to answer the main questions you’re likely to have but please feel free to raise any other questions with your doctor or a member of the medical physics team.

About radioactive iodine treatment

Radioactive iodine treatment involves swallowing a capsule that contains radioactive iodine (I–131) powder. I–131 is a type of radioactive iodine used to treat diseases of the thyroid. The thyroid gland naturally absorbs iodine. When this iodine is radioactive, like I–131, the radiation it gives out will destroy cells in the thyroid.

The amount of I–131 your doctor decides to use will depend on your condition. However, even a small amount of I–131 will make you slightly radioactive for a few days after treatment. When you go home you’ll need to take some precautions to reduce the chance of exposing your family or friends to any remaining radioactivity. The precautions are based on how long it takes for the I-131 to leave your body, and are explained in more detail below. Because of the exposure to radiation, it’s very important that:

- Women of childbearing age should not be pregnant at the time of treatment.
- Women must not become pregnant for at least six months following treatment.
- Breastfeeding stops before the treatment and shouldn’t start again once treatment has finished.
- Men should not father children for four months after treatment.

What are the alternatives?

The alternatives to radioactive iodine treatment include surgery or anti-thyroid drugs. Your doctor will discuss your options with you.

Preparing for radioactive iodine treatment

Please make sure that your doctor is aware of the following:

- Any medication you are taking. He or she will tell you if you need to stop taking any medicines that may reduce the effectiveness of your treatment.
- Any special dietary needs you have. Certain foods are rich in iodine and you may need to stop eating them before your treatment. Your doctor will tell you if you need to do this.

The I–131 capsule is about the size of an antibiotic capsule. If you think you will have difficulty swallowing it, please phone the medical physics department as soon as possible, and at least 10 days before your appointment.

Coming to the hospital for your treatment

You should arrive at the hospital 15 to 20 minutes before your appointment time and register at the Outpatient reception desk. You will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm that you understand the risks, benefits and possible alternatives to the procedure.
Your doctor will give you the I–131 capsule to swallow with warm water. A physicist will also be present to make sure that appropriate precautions are taken when handling the radioactive capsule. As soon as you swallow the capsule you will become slightly radioactive.

You will need to stay in the department for about 45 minutes after your treatment. This is to make sure that the I–131 is absorbed properly. You may feel or be sick after your treatment, although this is rare. Staying in the department after your treatment helps to reduce the risk of anyone being exposed to the radioactivity.

Precautions to take after going home

For the first week after you go home you should follow these precautions:

- Keep a set of crockery and cutlery for your own personal use. Washing with soap and hot water will remove any surface contamination. If you use a dishwasher, you don’t need to keep your crockery and cutlery separate.
- If you can, try to use a separate toilet. If this isn’t possible, make sure you flush the toilet twice after use. It’s important to keep the toilet area clean; use toilet paper to wipe up any drips and then flush it down the toilet.

Before you leave the hospital we will give you a special instruction card. You must carry this card with you at all times. It gives details of the precautions you must take after treatment and how long you need to wait before you can get back to your normal activities.

The following table gives some typical examples of what will be included on your card. However, your card may be different, depending on your personal circumstances.

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<td>Travelling on public transport</td>
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<td>Going to places such as the cinema or theatre</td>
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<td>Prolonged close contact with adults and children over 5 years</td>
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<td>Prolonged close contact with pregnant women and children under 5 years</td>
<td>25 days</td>
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<td>Return to work*</td>
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* The restrictions on when you can return to work will depend on your working environment and the estimated dose other people around you may receive. If you work closely with children, pregnant women or in a radiation-sensitive environment, much longer restrictions may apply. The physicist will discuss this with you in detail. If you feel unable to return to work due to your illness, you should talk to your doctor.

Air travel is not allowed until the restrictions on prolonged close contact with adults have passed (usually 14 days). If you plan to travel between countries in the six months after your treatment, please remember to take your instruction card with you. There will be a tiny, but measurable, amount of I–131 in your body several months after treatment and you may be asked by border security staff to explain why they can detect radiation. Show the security staff your instruction card so that they can see you have been treated with I–131. Our contact details are on the card in case further details are needed.

Follow-up

You will have a follow-up appointment with your doctor a few weeks after the treatment to assess your progress and discuss medication.
Contact

If you have any questions about your treatment, speak to your doctor or contact the medical physics team on +44 (0)20 7460 5619, or fax +44 (0)20 7460 5622. The department is open Monday to Friday between 9.00am and 5.30pm.