

Radiotherapy for age-related macular degeneration

Understanding NICE guidance –
information for people considering the
procedure, and for the public

March 2004



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Issue date: March 2004

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Website: www.nice.org.uk

ISBN: 1-84257-565-1

Published by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence
March 2004

Typeset by Icon Design, Eton
Print on Demand

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About this information

This information describes the guidance that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has issued to the NHS on a procedure called radiotherapy for age-related macular degeneration. It is not a complete description of what is involved in the procedure – the patient’s healthcare team should describe it in detail.

NICE has looked at whether radiotherapy is safe enough and works well enough for it to be used routinely for the treatment of age-related macular degeneration.

To produce this guidance, NICE has:

- looked at the results of studies on the safety of radiotherapy and how well it works
- asked experts for their opinions
- asked the views of the organisations that speak for the healthcare professionals and the patients and carers who will be affected by this guidance.

This guidance is part of NICE’s work on ‘interventional procedures’ (see ‘Further information’ on page 10).

About radiotherapy for age-related macular degeneration

Age-related macular degeneration is an eye disorder that starts later in life and causes problems with central vision (seeing things straight in front of you – usually people notice difficulties with close work and seeing detail). This sight loss becomes worse over time. The part of the eye that is affected is the macula. This is a small area of the retina, which is the inside back surface of the eyeball. The macula is responsible for clear central vision.

Sometimes macular degeneration happens because of changes in the area underneath it, in what's known as the choroid layer. Problems with the blood vessels here can mean that fluid leaks into the area under the macula and causes scarring. The macula becomes damaged as a result. This type of macular degeneration is known as wet macular degeneration.

Radiotherapy has been used in people with wet age-related macular degeneration where there are new blood vessels growing in the area under the macula. A beam of radiation is carefully directed at the area and is used to destroy the new blood vessels. The aim of this procedure is to slow down the patient's sight loss – it wouldn't be expected to give immediate improvements.

How well it works

What the studies said

NICE looked at three studies that compared having radiotherapy with having no treatment or having a very low amount of radiation that probably wouldn't have any effect on the blood vessels. In these studies, patients who had radiotherapy were no better off than the patients who did not have the treatment. In two other studies, radiotherapy appeared to slow down the speed at which patients' sight got worse. One of the problems with the studies was that they used different amounts of radiation so it was hard to compare the results in different groups of patients.

What the experts said

The experts thought the studies did not show that radiotherapy worked. Or if it did, it didn't work very well. One of the experts pointed out that all the patients in the UK having this treatment were in clinical trials designed to test how well radiotherapy worked.

Risks and possible problems

What the studies said

In the studies, the main problem was the development of a cataract, which is where the lens in the eye or its covering becomes cloudy. Other serious but rare problems were bleeding into the eye and retinal detachment, where the retina comes away from its supports in the eye.

What the experts said

One of the experts thought that the main problems were likely to be radiation damage to the retina, dry eyes and cataracts.

What has NICE decided?

NICE has decided that, if a doctor wants to carry out radiotherapy for age-related macular degeneration, it should be done as part of a research study that has been approved by a research ethics committee. A research ethics committee is a body that exists to protect the safety and well-being of anyone who is taking part in, or may take part in, a research study.

What the decision means for you

Your doctor may have offered you radiotherapy for age-related macular degeneration. NICE has considered this procedure because it is relatively new. NICE has decided that there are uncertainties about the benefits and risks. Because of these, NICE has recommended that radiotherapy for age-related macular degeneration should be carried out only as part of an approved research study. Your doctor should explain the aim of the study and what is involved before you decide whether to take part.

Further information

You have the right to be fully informed and to share in decision-making about the treatment you receive. You may want to discuss this guidance with the doctors and nurses looking after you.

You can visit the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk) for further information about the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Interventional Procedures Programme. A copy of the full guidance on radiotherapy for age-related macular degeneration is on the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk/IPG049guidance), or you can order a copy from the website or by telephoning the NHS Response Line on 0870 1555 455 and quoting reference number N0490. The evidence that NICE considered in developing this guidance is also available from the NICE website.

If you want more information on eye problems, a good starting point is NHS Direct (telephone 0845 4647) or NHS Direct Online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk).

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