NUCLEAR MEDICINE DEPARTMENT
THERAPY FOR THYROID CANCER

Your physician has referred you for a treatment dose of radioactive iodine for ablation (destruction) of any remaining functioning thyroid tissue and/or any functioning thyroid metastatic tissue. The treatment involves swallowing a capsule (or capsules) containing liquid radioactive iodine (I-131 sodium iodide). Most patients can go home immediately after the treatment, however patients who are unable to observe the recommended radiation safety precautions may require admission to a private hospital room for 2 to 6 days until their radiation level decreases to a publically safe level.

Other methods of therapy may be available, but this particular treatment is felt to be best for your situation at this time. Alternatives to this treatment and their related risks include: a) surgery with possible injury to structures in the neck and risks related to general anesthesia, b) external radiation therapy with possible radiation injury to the neck and nearby structures, c) no treatment except thyroid hormone, which may not adequately control the cancer.

We are attempting to destroy all functioning thyroid tissue. Results are not always successful and thus retreatment may be necessary as your condition requires. Since your body will no longer be producing adequate amounts of thyroid hormone, you will need to take thyroid hormone replacement medication for the rest of your life. Regular medical follow-up with your referring physician is important.

In general, treatment with radioactive iodine is safe and effective. However, while uncommon, there are several short and long term side effects that may occur. The short-term side effects are temporary and include loss of appetite, nausea or vomiting, sore throat, swelling in the neck, and tender salivary glands. The long-term side effects are rare and usually improve with time, but the risk of developing permanent effects increases with the number of treatments and high cumulative doses. These risks include: injury to the salivary glands resulting in dryness of the mouth and/or decrease in taste; injury to the lacrimal glands resulting in dry eyes; bone marrow depression resulting in decreased blood cell production; and injury to the vocal cord nerve resulting in hoarseness. Men may have transient decrease in sperm counts resulting in temporary infertility. Some studies suggest a possible slightly increased risk of leukemia in patients treated with high doses of radioactive iodine, however the existence of this risk remains controversial.

Female patients who might be pregnant or who are breastfeeding should not undergo this treatment.

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