Iodine-131 Therapy

This handout will tell you about the special precautions that you and the hospital staff must take during your treatment with Iodine-131 therapy (I-131). It also includes instructions for you to follow when you go home.

What is Iodine-131 therapy?

This therapy uses a form of iodine that is radioactive. It comes in a liquid or a capsule, and it is taken two times. The first dose is a low dose, called a tracer dose. This dose helps the doctor make decisions about your future treatment. You can go home after taking it. The second dose is a higher dose. It is called a therapy dose.

Depending on the dose of I-131 therapy and other factors, you may need to be admitted to the hospital. If you do not need to stay in the hospital, you will be able to go home after learning about the precautions you will need to follow after you leave the hospital. Your doctor will review these precautions with you in detail.

Why do I need Iodine-131 therapy?

This treatment can be used to destroy any thyroid tissue not removed by surgery or to treat some types of thyroid cancer that have spread to lymph nodes and other parts of the body. When I-131, is taken in liquid or capsule form, it collects in thyroid cells, with little effect on the rest of your body.

What happens if I am in the hospital for Iodine-131 therapy?

If you are in the hospital, you will be in a special room for patients who get I-131 therapy. This room has radiation shielding in the doors and walls to prevent the radiation from leaking into the halls or other rooms.
Your room will have paper on the floor. There will also be plastic covers on some of the furniture, doors, handles and switches. This is to protect others who will use the room after you. It also makes it easier to decontaminate the room after you go home. When you touch something in your room, please touch the covered parts only.

While you are in this special room, you cannot have visitors. You can call your family and friends on the telephone. Members of your health care team will use safety measures to protect themselves while caring for you. The staff will limit the time spent in your room. This will help reduce the staff’s exposure to radiation.

A Radiation Safety Specialist will come to your room 1 to 2 times a day to measure your radiation levels. These radiation levels will be less every day. Once your radiation level has decreased to a certain point, you will be able to go home. Most radiation is gone in a few days. Within 3 weeks, only traces of radioactive iodine remain in your body.

Why do I need to follow a low iodine diet?

When you are scheduled to have your I-131 therapy, you will be asked to follow a low iodine diet. You need to follow this diet because it is important to “starve” the thyroid cancer cells of iodine. This lets the radioactive iodine enter those cells. Your thyroid cancer cells do not know the difference between iodine that is radioactive and iodine that is non-radioactive. You will need to stay on this diet for 2 weeks before getting either the tracer or therapy dose of I-131. Your health care team will give you information about the low iodine diet.

What side effects are there in taking the Iodine-131 therapy?

The iodine radiation may cause patients to have a dry mouth or lose their sense of taste or smell for a short time after therapy. Chewing sugar free gum or sucking on lemon drops may decrease the dry feeling in your mouth. **You must wait 24 hours after therapy before using gum or lemon drops.** Some patients may also get an upset stomach. Ask your doctor or nurse to give you medicine before taking the I-131 if you have a sensitive stomach. During treatments, you need to drink lots of water and other fluids. This will help the I-131 pass out of your body more quickly.
What special care is needed in the hospital?

- Your meals will be served with paper or plastic dishes, utensils and trays.
- Menu choices are made for you because you must eat a low iodine diet. You may bring your own snacks or meals and have them stored in the hospital refrigerator.
- Throw away your dishes and tray in the special gray plastic trash container. If you do not eat all of your food, flush the soft foods down the toilet. If the food is too bulky to flush, please throw it in the special gray plastic trash container.
- Put all your trash into the large gray trash can.
- Flush the toilet 3 times after you use it.
- If you feel like you are going to get sick (vomit), try to go into the bathroom. Vomit into the toilet. Call your nurse right away. You will need to flush the toilet 3 times.
- **Anything that you bring into the shielded room must stay in the room, even after you go home.** This is to keep the radioactive material out of public areas. You may be given special permission to take out some things such as: glasses, dentures, rings or contact lenses. Other things like books or magazines must stay in the room and will be thrown away after you leave.

Will I have any special precautions to follow when I go home?

When you go home, you will still have some radioactive material in your body. The Office of Radiation Safety will give you special instructions before you are discharged, that you must follow for 3 to 5 days after you leave the hospital.

**Visiting guidelines during the first 7 days after you leave the hospital:**

- You can only visit with children under 16 years of age and women who are pregnant for 15 to 20 minutes a day.
- **You should stay at least 6 or more feet away from children under 16 years of age. Do not hold children or put a child on your lap during the visit.**
- Do not breastfeed until your doctor tells you that you may start again.
Should I tell my doctor about the medicines I take?

It is important to tell your doctor about any medicines, supplements or remedies that you take. You may be asked to stop taking your thyroid medicine 4 to 6 weeks before your I-131 therapy. Your doctor will tell you when you can begin taking your medicines again.

Who should I call if I have questions?

Call your doctor if you have questions about your treatment or how to manage the side effects.

If you have any questions or concerns about radiation safety, you may call the OSU Radiation Emergency cell phone at (614) 561-7969.