



East Suffolk and
North Essex
NHS Foundation Trust

A guide for patients having internal radiotherapy to the cervix

Gynaecological (HDR) Brachytherapy

***Radiotherapy Department
Colchester Hospital***

Tel: 01206 745055



What is brachytherapy?

Radiotherapy uses high dose X-rays to treat cancer. These rays can be directed at the site of the cancer from outside the body (external beam) or inside the body (brachytherapy). Many women have both these types of treatment.

Important

Please note that your body won't be radioactive after the treatment. You can safely mix with other people, including children, at any time.

About this booklet

This booklet has been written specifically for people who are going to have brachytherapy treatment and we have included information that we hope you may find useful.

You will have this treatment as an outpatient and if you are having external beam treatment first, the brachytherapy will be carried out when the course of external beam radiotherapy is complete.

Many women are concerned about brachytherapy treatment. We hope that your discussion with our staff, as well as the information in this booklet, will help to answer many of the questions and remove some of the worries you may have about it.

Important

Do not be afraid to ask us to explain anything that you do not understand. There is a lot of information to take in and sometimes it is difficult to absorb it all at once.

We are more than happy to answer any of your questions.



Before you have the treatment

Your oncologist and surgeon have recommended that you have a short course of internal gynaecological radiotherapy as an outpatient.

A member of the brachytherapy team will explain the exact details of your treatment, which will be individually planned for you, and they will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

You will be asked to sign a consent form to agree to proceed with the treatment. You will then be given an appointment to come in for the brachytherapy treatment.

Important

If you are experiencing upset bowels or diarrhoea before coming into hospital for this procedure please contact us for advice.

What to expect on the day of treatment

On the day of your treatment you will be asked to come into hospital early, when you will be admitted to the ward. A member of the brachytherapy team will explain the procedure and will be happy to answer any questions you have. On admission it may be necessary to do some routine tests, such as blood tests, before the procedure begins.

Important

You may be asked not to eat or drink anything after midnight before your admission day. This is a common request if an anaesthetic is to be used.

What to expect in theatre

Once the theatre staff are ready you will be taken to theatre, where you will be given an anaesthetic. Your oncologist will then carry out the procedure in order to place specially designed hollow tubes, known as applicators, into your vagina and uterus. An ultrasound scan may be carried out to help the oncologist to position the tubes. There may be some gauze packing in your vagina to help keep the applicators in the right position.

You might find that the applicator and gauze packing cause a feeling of discomfort and pressure in your lower abdomen. Pain medication will be available if you need it.

A special tube called a catheter will be inserted into your bladder so that your urine can be drained into a bag. This will save you moving and trying to use a bedpan while the planning and treatment take place. In some patients the catheter can cause a burning feeling, so if you need it, pain relief will be available.

Going to the CT scanner

Once the applicators have been positioned, you will be moved to the theatre recovery room and then to the CT scanner in the Radiotherapy Department. You will be moved on a bed and covered to ensure your privacy and dignity are preserved.

Going to the MRI scanner

After the CT scan the brachytherapy team will take you to have an MRI scan and help to position you for the scan.



Going to the Brachytherapy Suite

Following the scans you will be taken to the Brachytherapy Suite. You will remain there and be looked after while the physics team plans your treatment, which will be individual and unique to you. The physics planning will take between two and six hours but once it has been completed we will be ready to begin treatment.

How is the treatment carried out?

You will be taken into the brachytherapy room. Setting up the treatment will take about 15 minutes. The applicators are connected to flexible tubes, which are connected to the brachytherapy treatment machine.

During treatment the radiographers will ask you to lie still and as relaxed as possible, breathing normally. Please be assured that you will not feel anything during the treatment.

You will be alone in the room but will be closely monitored by the radiographers by closed circuit TV. The radiographers can talk to you and you can talk to them during the treatment. The small radioactive source passes down the flexible tubes into the applicators. The machine will initially make a slight noise and this is quite usual. The actual treatment will take about 20 minutes.

Once the treatment is complete, the radioactive source will automatically go back into the machine. One of the radiotherapy team will remove the applicators, catheter and gauze packing. We can give you pain medication if you need it.

What happens next?

You will be able to get up and dressed. You might notice some vaginal discharge, such as slight bleeding and it might be necessary for you to wear a sanitary towel.

One of the radiotherapy team will give you booklets on your treatment aftercare and feminine care. Once you are ready you will be discharged and you may go home.

Side effects

Although radiotherapy is completely painless, it can have some side effects. These vary depending not only on how much treatment you receive but also which part of the body is being treated.

Some people are more sensitive to radiation than others and are more likely to experience side effects. Unfortunately there is no way of identifying these people before they are treated.

Why do side effects occur?

Radiotherapy is a localised treatment, so it affects the part of the body being treated. When your treatment is being planned, your consultant will select a dose of radiation that has the best chance of destroying any cancer cells while having the smallest possible effect on healthy tissue.

Radiation can cause some damage to the normal healthy tissues in and around the treated area and it is this damage that causes side effects.

It is not unusual to have slight bleeding or discharge after the treatment has been completed. The treatment can also cause diarrhoea or a burning sensation when passing urine. These side effects are usually mild and should gradually



disappear a few days after your treatment is over.

Radiotherapy may cause scarring and narrowing of the vagina. This can make it difficult for your doctor to examine you at follow-up appointments and can make normal sexual intercourse uncomfortable.

To help minimise this problem, vaginal dilation will be discussed with you and you will be offered a dilator pack. This pack contains a range of plastic tubes of various sizes that dilate or stretch the vagina. Vaginal dilators help the muscles of the vagina to relax and prevents scar tissue developing.

Sex

You may feel rather tired during and for a while after your course of radiotherapy, so you may not feel interested in the physical aspect of your relationship at that time. One common fear is that cancer can be passed on to your partner during sex, which is completely untrue. Cancer is not contagious and it is perfectly safe for you and your partner to resume intercourse when you both feel ready.

What can you do?

Sexual feelings should return once you feel well again and when you and your partner have had time to adapt to any physical and emotional changes.

Follow-up appointment

Once your course of treatment is complete you will receive an appointment in the post to see the oncologist so that your progress can be checked.

This appointment will be about 12 weeks after your treatment has finished.

Useful contact numbers

Radiotherapy Reception

Tel: **01206 745055**

Brachytherapy Suite

Tel: **01206 745007**

Monica Norris, Brachytherapy Advanced Practice Radiographer

Radiotherapy nurses

Tel: **01206 745038**

Macmillan Advanced Radiotherapy Practitioners

Tel: **01206 745025**

Monday to Friday, 9 am–4 pm (Direct Line/Answerphone)

Wellbeing Centre and Macmillan Cancer Information Centre
Colchester Hospital

Tel: **01206 745347**

(Ground floor near internal entrance to Radiotherapy department)

Macmillan Cancer Support

Freephone: **0808 808 0000**

Please ask if you need this leaflet
in an alternative format.

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