

Patient information factsheet

Brachytherapy vault treatment

Your doctors have recommended you have a treatment called brachytherapy, also known as internal radiotherapy. This is a treatment given to women with gynaecological cancer (cancers that originate in the female reproductive system).

This factsheet aims to answer some of the initial questions you are likely to have about what the treatment involves. If you would like more information or have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a radiographer who will be pleased to advise you.

What does brachytherapy vault treatment involve?

During brachytherapy treatment, a small radioactive device called a treatment applicator (which looks like a tampon) is inserted into your vagina. This enables radiotherapy to be given directly to the affected area. The treatment is usually given in two, three or four sessions. Your doctor will discuss this with you and answer any questions that you may have.

Your CT planning appointment

Before your brachytherapy treatment begins, you will need to attend a CT planning appointment to have a CT scan. CT stands for computerised tomography and uses x-rays and a computer to create detailed images of the inside of the body. Information from the scan is then used to plan your brachytherapy treatment.

What happens when I come for CT planning?

You will attend the radiotherapy department, Level A, Southampton General Hospital as an outpatient. Please report to radiotherapy reception when you arrive.

A radiographer will meet you and explain the procedure. You will be asked to go to the toilet to empty your bladder immediately before the CT scan.

In the CT room you will be asked to put on a hospital gown and remove your clothing from the waist down, then lie down on the couch with a pillow under your head. Your legs will be raised and supported with knee rests. A radiographer will perform a vaginal examination and a treatment applicator will then be inserted into your vagina. The applicator may feel uncomfortable but should not be painful. Pain relief is not usually required but is available if necessary. Your legs will then be lowered so you are lying flat on the bed.

The CT scan takes about five minutes. It's painless and none of the equipment will touch you. Once the scan is finished, the applicator will be removed from your vagina and you will be able to get dressed. Your radiographer will explain your treatment appointments and answer any questions you may have before you go home.

Please note you can eat and drink as normal before your CT scan.

What happens when I come for my treatment?

Please report to the radiotherapy reception. You will then be invited to take a seat in one of our waiting rooms.

You will be met by a radiographer who will explain the treatment to you. You will be asked to go to the toilet to empty your bladder before your treatment, as you did before the CT scan.

In the treatment room you will be asked to change into a hospital gown and to remove all your clothing from your waist down. You will lie on the couch and the applicator will be inserted into your vagina (just as it was for your CT scan). A tube will be connected between the vaginal applicator and the brachytherapy treatment machine. When the treatment is about to start the radiographers will leave the room. They will remain outside, watching you on a discreet closed circuit television. You will be asked to keep still and breathe normally.

You will not feel the treatment and it is not painful. The treatment itself takes approximately ten minutes, but the whole process will take approximately 20 minutes.

Once your treatment is finished the applicator will be removed. You are then free to leave and continue the day as normal. Brachytherapy treatment does not make you radioactive and it is perfectly safe to be around other people.

Possible side effects

You may have a slight discharge after treatment as a lubrication cream is used during the insertion of the applicator. This is normal.

Other possible side effects may include:

- tiredness
- diarrhoea (loose bowel actions)
- increased need to pass urine
- cystitis
- vaginal soreness
- light vaginal bleeding

It's also possible that you may experience something called stenosis of the vagina (the vaginal walls can become sticky and the vagina shorter, narrower and less 'elastic'). You will be offered dilators to use after your treatment which help to prevent this from happening. Dilators are small plastic tubes which can be inserted to keep the vagina open and prevent the formation of scar tissue. You will have the opportunity to discuss this along with any other issues regarding sexual function with a specialist radiographer or nurse.

You might sometimes pass blood in your urine as a result of the treatment. However if you experience pain, burning or discomfort on passing water please tell the radiographers.

Tips for dealing with side effects

If you have had external radiotherapy you may already be experiencing some of these side effects. If not, then it may be a couple of weeks before you get any of them. However, it's important to remember that everyone is different, and not all patients will experience the side effects outlined here.

Make sure that you eat a healthy diet. We recommend a low fibre diet if you have diarrhoea. If you would like more information about this, ask a radiographer.

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You might feel more tired than usual after the treatment. Rest when you can, but you may find that regular light exercise such as walking can help to reduce tiredness.

It may help you to feel more positive about treatment if, rather than expecting problems, you plan instead to tackle any should they arise. Remember that you know your body best so tell a member of your healthcare team if anything is worrying you.

Skin care

The treatment may cause reddening of the skin around the vagina and this may become itchy. This does not happen immediately but may develop slowly over a few days. There are several things you can do to minimise this:

- look after the skin around your vagina and treat it gently
- wash carefully using a soap or shower gel you have used before, pat dry gently with a soft towel
- avoid vigorous rubbing as this can cause soreness
- do not soak in the bath or have the water too hot
- only use preparations, lotions or creams that you have used before and that you know you do not react to
- wearing loose fitting clothing made of natural fibres will allow the air to circulate around the area

Ask a radiographer for advice if you have any concerns.

After radiotherapy

On the last day of your treatment, you will be told about a follow-up appointment with your doctor. This appointment is usually for about six to eight weeks following the end of your treatment to allow time for the area to recover. It's normal for the effects of the treatment to persist for two to three weeks, so continue to follow any skin care and dietary advice that you have found helpful until things return to normal.

Useful information

Parking

Car park 8 is situated outside the Oncology Centre. This can be found by following directions for the eye unit. Parking spaces are limited, so please allow plenty of time to park.

Patients having radiotherapy treatment are entitled to a discount on parking. Remember to validate your ticket at the radiotherapy reception before paying at the parking machine.

Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centre

This is located on B level in the East Wing Courtyard. Opening hours are Monday to Friday from 10am to 4pm. Drop-in sessions are available or you can book an appointment by calling 023 8120 6037.

Free prescriptions

Patients having treatment for cancer are entitled to free NHS prescriptions. If you are not already claiming for these, please ask a member of staff for an exemption certificate.

Who to contact if you have concerns

If you have urgent symptoms relating to your current radiotherapy treatment, please call the acute oncology service at Southampton General Hospital on 07867 973649. This number is answered 24-hours, seven days a week, but is only for treatment-related symptoms and not for general queries such as rearranging appointments or hospital transport, for example.

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If your symptoms are not urgent, you can speak to one of the radiographers when you attend for your radiotherapy treatment.

In an emergency call **999**.

Useful links

NHS Choices – Radiotherapy side effects:

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Radiotherapy/Pages/Side-effects.aspx

Cancer Research UK:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/cervical-cancer/Cancer

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/womb-cancer

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.