

Patient information factsheet

Female pelvis radiotherapy

Your doctors have recommended you have radiotherapy treatment. Radiotherapy involves the use of high-energy radiation and is commonly used to treat cancer - almost half of people with cancer have radiotherapy as part of their treatment plan.

This factsheet explains what to expect at your radiotherapy treatment appointments. It aims to answer some of the initial questions you are likely to have but if you would like more information or have any concerns, please speak to a radiographer who will be pleased to advise you.

What to expect when you come for treatment

When you arrive in the radiotherapy department, check in using your barcode letter and take a seat in the waiting area.

You will need to have a full bladder for your treatment. Therefore when you arrive you will be asked to drink accordingly to ensure your bladder is full before your appointment time.

How much will I need to drink?

It's important for the accuracy of your treatment that your bladder is as comfortably full as when you came for your CT planning scan. We'll give you a specific quantity of fluid and a set amount of time in which to drink it, based on the information recorded at your planning scan. Please ensure you arrive with enough time before your appointment for this to take place. A radiographer will come and tell you when to start drinking.

If at any time you feel that you are struggling to hold your bladder or you are not comfortably full, please tell the one of the radiographers before they take you into the treatment room.

Changing into a gown

The radiographer may ask you to change into a hospital gown before you go into the treatment room. Changing facilities are available on every treatment machine.

When you are called into the treatment room

Once you enter the treatment room you will be asked to confirm your **name, date of birth** and **address**. This will be repeated each time you attend for treatment.

You will be positioned for treatment as you were during your CT planning scan. The radiographers will take time to position you carefully, using the reference marks applied at your CT planning scan. It's important that you remain still so that we can deliver your treatment accurately.

Radiotherapy treatment is painless and each session usually lasts for 10 to 15 minutes. Your radiographers will be able to answer any questions you may have about what to expect.

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Alongside your treatment, you may be required to have blood tests or to see the doctor and/or a specialist radiographer on a regular basis. If this is the case we will tell you, but please check with a radiographer before leaving the department after treatment.

Once your radiotherapy treatment is complete you are free to leave and continue the day as normal.

Appointment schedule

On the first day of your treatment you will be given a list of appointments, please note that these are subject to change. If we need to change any of your appointments we will let you know.

Side effects

Radiotherapy can cause side effects, during and after your course of treatment. The radiographers will ask you how you are feeling every day. Feel free to discuss any treatment related changes or concerns about side effects with them. Everyone reacts to radiotherapy differently, but you may begin to notice some or all of the following side effects during your second or third week of treatment.

Effects on the skin

Over time, the skin over the area that's being treated with radiotherapy may become red and itchy.

The following advice will help to minimise skin reactions:

- Treat the area gently
- Avoid vigorous rubbing and instead pat skin dry with a soft towel
- Avoid very hot or very cold water when you wash
- Use your normal washing products – don't suddenly change brands or use a new product while you are having radiotherapy
- Moisturise sparingly with a moisturiser that you have used previously (but not a zinc-based barrier cream such as Sudocrem)
- Wear loose fitting clothes made from natural fibres that will not irritate your skin
- Avoid exposing the area to the sun or cold wind

Effects on your bowels and back passage

Your bowel habits may change. You may find that your stools become looser and more frequent or you may occasionally become constipated.

Your back passage (rectum) may become sore and irritated and you may notice blood on wiping. If you use haemorrhoid products, tell the radiographers which one you normally use as they may have to recommend an alternative.

Urinary effects

The frequency, urgency and flow of your urine may alter as the treatment progresses.

- You may experience a stinging or burning sensation similar to cystitis when you urinate. If this happens, let your radiographer know. You may be asked to provide a urine sample so that we can check for infection.
- Occasionally you may pass urine which appears cloudy or has blood in it. This is normal.
- As your treatment progresses, you may find you are urinating more at night time.

Tiredness (fatigue)

As your treatment progresses you may become more tired. Try to take a little light exercise and drink plenty of fluids to reduce your fatigue.

Vaginal effects

You may notice some soreness inside and around the outside of the vagina. It's fine to have sex during treatment as long as it isn't painful.

Some women also experience narrowing of the vagina (vaginal stenosis). This is a medium to long-term side effect which can affect sexual activity and make vaginal examinations more difficult. To help prevent this, we may give you vaginal dilators to use regularly for 18 months after your treatment has finished. 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 these along with any other issues regarding sexual function with a specialist radiographer or nurse.

If you notice any changes or side effects during your treatment, please discuss them with the radiographers. They will be able to offer advice or reassurance and suggest ways to help you cope.

After radiotherapy

Side effects from your treatment will be at their worst around two weeks after your final radiotherapy session. They should then gradually settle over the next couple of months. Continue to follow the advice you have been given during your treatment. If you have made any dietary changes you can gradually reverse them. You'll have a follow-up appointment with your doctor approximately six to eight weeks after you have finished your treatment.

Frequently asked questions

- **Will I be radioactive?** You will not be radioactive; it's perfectly safe for you to be around family and friends.
- **Can I swim?** While we would normally encourage physical exercise, swimming in chlorinated water can dry your skin out further and could cause a worse skin reaction.
- **After treatment, can I continue with my normal activities?** Yes you can, within reason. If you start to feel really tired or unwell you may have to make adjustments.
- **Do I feel anything as the treatment is happening?** No, you don't feel a thing. It is quick and painless.
- **Can I miss treatments?** We would advise that you do not miss a treatment once you have started. You might find that there are gaps in your appointment schedule, which may be due to machine services or public holidays. We work hard to minimise these gaps and you may on occasion be asked to attend on a weekend or public holiday.

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

The centre 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 on telephone:

023 8120 6037.

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Who to contact if you have concerns

You can contact the Macmillan gynaecological oncology clinical nurse specialists on telephone: **023 8120 8765** or email: gynaecologysupport@uhs.nhs.uk.

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.

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

Cancer Research UK – Radiotherapy for cervical cancer:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/cervical-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy/about-cervical-cancer-radiotherapy

Cancer Research UK – Radiotherapy for endometrial and uterine cancer:

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

Cancer Research UK – Radiotherapy for vulval cancer:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/vulval-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy/

Macmillan – Pelvis radiotherapy explained:

www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/vulva-cancer/treating/radiotherapy/pelvic-radiotherapy-explained

NHS Choices – Radiotherapy: side effects:

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

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.