

Patient information factsheet

Brachytherapy vault treatment

We have given you this factsheet because 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 may have about what the treatment involves. If you would like more information or have any further questions, please speak to a radiographer.

What does brachytherapy vault treatment involve?

During brachytherapy vault 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 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 the radiotherapy reception when you arrive.

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

In the CT room we will ask you to put on a hospital gown. You will need to remove your clothing from the waist down. We will ask you to lie down on the couch and we will put a pillow under your head. We will raise your legs, which will be supported with knee rests.

A radiographer will perform a vaginal examination and will then insert a treatment applicator into your vagina. The applicator may be uncomfortable but should not be painful. Pain relief is not usually required, but is available if you need it. We will then lower your legs so that you are lying flat on the bed.

The CT scan takes about five minutes. It is painless and none of the equipment will touch you. Once the scan is finished, we will remove the applicator from your vagina. You will then be able to get dressed.

Patient information factsheet

Your radiographer will explain your treatment appointments and answer any questions you may have before you go home.

Please note that 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. We will ask you to take a seat in the waiting room.

A radiographer will meet you and will explain the treatment to you. We will ask you to go to the toilet to empty your bladder before your treatment, as you did before your CT scan.

In the treatment room, we will ask you to put on a hospital gown and remove your clothes from the waist down. We will ask you to lie on the couch. We will insert the applicator into your vagina, as happened during your CT scan. We will connect a tube between the vaginal applicator and the brachytherapy treatment machine. When the treatment is about to begin, the radiographer will leave the room. The radiographer will remain outside during the treatment. However, they will be able to see the procedure on a discreet closed circuit television.

We will ask you to keep still and to breathe normally during the treatment. The treatment is not painful and you will not feel anything. The treatment itself takes approximately ten minutes, but the whole process will take approximately 20 minutes.

Once your treatment is finished, we will remove the applicator. You will then be able to get dressed and leave the hospital. Brachytherapy treatment does not make you radioactive, so it is safe to be around other people after your treatment.

Possible side effects

You may have a slight discharge after treatment. This is because there is a lubrication cream used to insert the applicator. This is normal.

Other possible side effects may include:

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

It is also possible that you may experience stenosis of the vagina (the vaginal walls become sticky and the vagina shorter, narrower and less 'elastic'). We will offer you dilators to use after treatment to prevent this from happening. Dilators are small plastic tubes which can be inserted to keep the vagina open and prevent scar tissue forming. You will be able to discuss this, and any other issues related to sexual function, with a specialist radiographer or nurse.

You may pass blood in your urine as a result of the treatment. However, if you experience pain, burning or discomfort when urinating, please tell the radiographer.

Dealing with side effects

If you have had external radiotherapy, you may already be experiencing some of these side effects. If not, you may not experience them until a few weeks after treatment. However, it is 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. Please ask a radiographer for more information about this.

You may 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.

Remember that you know your body best, so speak to 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, such as:

- looking after the skin around your vagina and treating it gently
- washing carefully using soap or shower gel you have used before
- patting dry gently with a soft towel
- avoiding vigorous rubbing as this can cause soreness
- not soaking in the bath or having the water too hot
- only using 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 to help air to circulate around the area

Please ask a radiographer for advice if you have any concerns.

After radiotherapy

On the last day of your treatment, we will tell you about a follow-up appointment with your doctor. This appointment is usually six to eight weeks after your treatment, to allow for the area to recover. It is normal for the effects of the treatment to carry on for two to three weeks, so continue to follow any skin care and dietary advice you have found helpful.

Useful information

Parking

Blue car park can be found outside the oncology centre. You can also find it by following signs to 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**.

Patient information factsheet

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.

Contact us

If you have urgent symptoms relating to your current radiotherapy treatment, please call the **acute oncology service** on **023 8120 1345**.

This number is answered 24-hours a day, seven days a week. This number is for treatment-related symptoms only and is **not** for general queries such as rearranging appointments or hospital transport.

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

In an emergency, call **999**.

For any non-urgent queries, please contact the radiotherapy reception.

Radiotherapy reception

Telephone: **023 8120 8568** (Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm)

Useful links

NHS Choices - Radiotherapy side effects

www.nhs.uk/conditions/radiotherapy/side-effects/

Cancer Research UK

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

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

For a translation of this document, or a version in another format such as easy read, large print, Braille or audio, please telephone **0800 484 0135** or email **patientsupporthub@uhs.nhs.uk**

For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**