

PATIENT INFORMATION

Vaginal Brachytherapy

1. Introduction

Radiotherapy treatment can be given from outside the body (external) or from inside the body (internal). **Brachytherapy** is the use of “internal radiation” in this case to the vagina. If you are having external beam treatment, this will occur after your external beam radiotherapy is completed. Brachytherapy is performed at Liverpool Hospital. This booklet is designed to provide you with information about brachytherapy to the vagina.

2. Rationale for Brachytherapy

Brachytherapy allows the vagina to be treated to high doses of radiotherapy while minimising radiation to the bowels or bladder. It may be used in the following instances:

1. **After surgery** – If you have had surgery for cancer of the uterus or cervix, then vaginal brachytherapy may be recommended to reduce the chance of the cancer recurring at the top of the vagina.
2. **After external beam radiotherapy** – If you have had external beam radiotherapy as part of your treatment for cancer of the uterus, cervix, or vagina, vaginal brachytherapy is sometimes recommended if there is felt to be a significant risk of the cancer recurring in the vagina.

3. Brachytherapy Treatment

Brachytherapy to the vagina consists of 2-4 treatments. Generally these occur once or twice a week. You will need to allow approximately 30 minutes for these appointments.

Your **Radiation Oncologist** will work out the timing of your brachytherapy sessions. Chemotherapy is **NOT** given during the brachytherapy. If you are receiving external beam radiotherapy the first brachytherapy is given the week following your last external beam radiotherapy treatment.

Treatment

The actual Brachytherapy Radiation Treatment is given by trained **Brachytherapy Radiation Therapists**. A **Medical Physicist** and your **Radiation Oncologist** will also be present. The Radiation Oncologist will insert an applicator into the vagina. This is like a plastic cylinder that will stretch the vagina. The applicator is hollow and is attached to a machine that holds the radiation sources. The treatment takes between 10-20 minutes.

After the treatment has finished, the applicators are taken out and you may go home. This process is repeated for the remaining appointments.

You are **NOT** “radioactive” and do not need to take any special precautions after treatment.

4. Side Effects of Brachytherapy

Brachytherapy works by delivering a high dose of Radiation to a small area. Like external beam radiotherapy the normal cells in the area being treated are also affected. This causes side effects. However, normal tissue cells have a greater capacity to recover from the radiation compared to cancer cells. The gap between each treatment allows the normal cells to recover. The following is a list of possible side effects that may be experienced.

Early Side effects

Pain

This is due to the stretching of the vagina from the insertion of the applicator. This usually settles within a few hours.

Bleeding from the vagina

This is uncommon but may occur from the insertion of the applicators. It usually settles within a few days.

Burning sensation when passing urine

This can occur because the radiotherapy causes some inflammation in the urethra (passage to pass urine). **Ural sachets** can help. These can be bought at a chemist.

Long Term Side effects

The radiation has to travel through some of your normal tissues to get to the area that is being treated. These tissues are damaged by the radiation but usually recover. However sometimes radiation can cause permanent changes in your body. You may not have any symptoms from this. Occasionally these changes can cause side effects months to years after radiotherapy. Your radiotherapy is planned in a way to reduce the chance of any long term side effects.

Vaginal symptoms

The vagina will become drier from radiotherapy and may be smaller as well. You may need to use water-based lubricants such as **KY jelly, Lubafax, Sylk, Wet Stuff, and Glide**. These can be bought from your chemist or supermarket. Your doctor may also prescribe **Vagifem** pessaries to help. Your Radiation Oncologist will also recommend a **Vaginal Dilator** at the end of treatment. This is a plastic cylinder used to stretch the vagina after radiotherapy to try and stop it from shrinking. You will be referred to a **Clinical Psychologist** for education on the use of the dilator.

Sexual Function

Radiotherapy to the pelvis can affect your sex life. It may be painful to have sex because your vagina is smaller and dryer. A lot of lubrication may be needed for sexual intercourse. You may find that your sexual desire is not the same as before treatment. Speak to your doctor if you are having problems. Referral to a psychologist or sexual health counsellor may help in improving your sexual function.

Second malignancy (development of another cancer)

Radiation exposure can cause cancer. Although this is true, the risk is extremely small (less than 1 in 1000 patients) and would usually take more than 10-15 years to develop. The chances of your cancer recurring without radiotherapy are higher than the risk of developing a cancer from radiotherapy.

Pregnancy (if applicable)

It is very important that you do not become pregnant whilst you receive radiotherapy. Radiation will cause damage to a developing foetus. You must tell your radiation oncologist before you receive radiotherapy if you are pregnant or may be pregnant.

