



What to Expect When Receiving Brachytherapy to the Pelvis Using an Intravaginal Applicator

PMH

Information for patients receiving high dose rate (HDR) brachytherapy (Internal Radiation Therapy) for gynecological cancer

This pamphlet will explain:

- what you can expect during brachytherapy using an intravaginal applicator
- what the possible side effects are and how you can manage them

Name: _____

Medical Record #: _____

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For your Brachytherapy, please check in at the Princess Margaret Hospital, Radiation Therapy Reception Desk on **Level 2B**. The whole procedure including seeing the doctor will take about one hour.

What Is Brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy is a type of internal radiation treatment where a “sealed” radioactive source is placed into or near your tumor site. The treatment machine is called an HDR (high dose rate) unit. The treatment unit stores the radioactive source.

Since the radioactive source is sealed and then put into an applicator, the source is contained and will not spread to any other areas of your body. To treat gynecological cancer, a special applicator is inserted in the vagina called an intravaginal applicator (see picture). The applicator is then attached to the treatment unit by a connector tube. When the treatment starts, the radioactive source will travel into the applicator inside your vagina.

How do I prepare for my treatment?

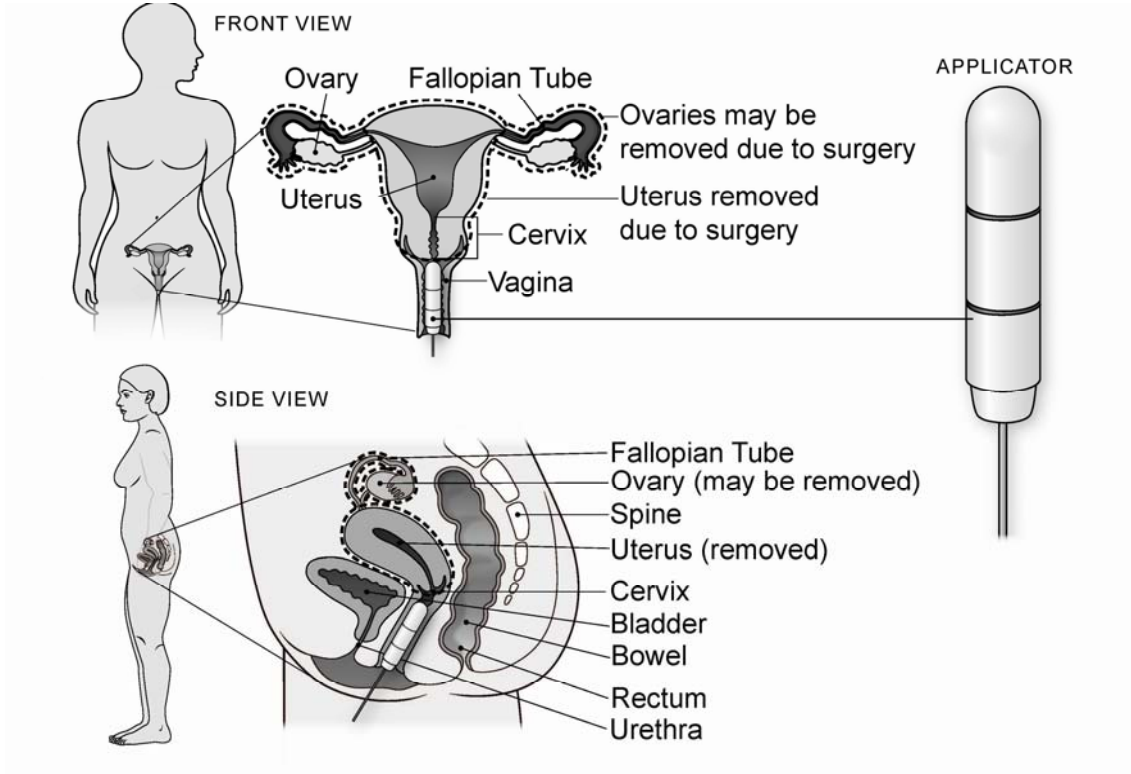
You do not have to make any special preparation. When you arrive, your radiation therapist will ask you to empty your bladder just before your treatment.

How long is each treatment and how many treatments will I have?

Your treatment will be given on an out-patient basis, which means you can go home after your treatments. You will be in the hospital for about an hour. The treatment itself takes about 10 to 15 minutes. The treatment time needed to give you the required dose is calculated based on the measurements from your sizing appointment.

Your Oncologist will decide how many treatments you will receive. Most patients have more than one treatment.

Intravaginal Applicator



How will I receive my treatment?

Step 1: The applicator will be inserted

- You will lie on your back, with your legs up in stirrups.
- Your oncologist will examine your vagina and after using a lubricant, he/she will place the applicator inside your vagina (see picture). If needed, a numbing gel can be used to reduce the discomfort of inserting the applicator. Please let your oncologist know if you cannot manage the discomfort.
- A clamp will be attached to the applicator to prevent the applicator from moving.

Step 2: The applicator will be connected to the treatment unit

- Your legs will be lowered for treatment, but will stay in the stirrups.
- The applicator will be connected to a tube which is attached to the treatment unit.
- You will be asked to lay still and breathe normally.
- Your oncologist and radiation therapists will leave the room just before your treatment begins.
- Your healthcare team will be watching you on a TV monitor and you will be able to speak to them through an intercom if needed.

Step 3: Your treatment will begin

- When your treatment begins, the radioactive source will travel from the treatment unit to the applicator.
- The radioactive source will stay in that location for the calculated time, usually for 10 to 15 minutes depending on your prescribed dose.
- The treatment itself will not make you more uncomfortable, however, if needed, your healthcare team can stop the treatment at any time and enter the room.
- When your treatment is finished, the radioactive source will automatically return to the treatment unit.
- The applicator is then removed by your radiation therapist or oncologist.
- Once you are dressed you will be able to go home.

What are the possible side effects and how do I manage them?

You may be already experiencing fatigue if you had external beam radiation treatment. The fatigue will continue with these brachytherapy treatments.

The table on page 6 shows the possible side effects you may experience. Continue to follow your healthcare team's instructions until your symptoms improve. In general, side effects may continue for about 2 weeks after treatment is completed.

Remember: Make note of the side effects you experience and tell your healthcare team at your next appointment.

Possible side effects you <u>may</u> experience	What you can do
Soreness in the genital area (specifically the outer labia)	Use a Sitz bath. Ask for a copy of the "Having a Sitz Bath at Home" pamphlet for instructions on how to make one and how often you can use it.
Burning when you urinate	Drink more fluids, especially cranberry juice
Softer stools or diarrhea	Avoid foods high in fibre. For more information ask for a copy of the "Eating Hints for People with Diarrhea" pamphlet. You may need to take over the counter anti-diarrheal medication, available from your local pharmacy.

How will I feel after my treatment?

You should not feel anything from the actual treatment. The insertion of the applicator may cause some discomfort or mild pain. Using some local freezing before insertion will help. You may be sore and tender in the pelvic area if you have just finished external radiation treatment.

Will I be radioactive?

No, you are not radioactive at any time.

When can I go home?

You can go home as soon as the treatment is completed each day. You will be given a follow-up appointment at the last treatment. You will also be given vaginal dilators and instructions for how to use them. A vaginal dilator is a smooth plastic tube that is inserted into the vagina to reduce narrowing of the vagina after radiation treatment.

What about my sexual health?

In general, sexual intercourse can begin when you feel ready. Most women find it helpful to use more lubrication during intercourse. If you would like more information, please speak to a member of your healthcare team.

What happens when all my treatments are finished?

Your treatment and care is unique to you. There may be more information you need to know when your treatment is almost finished. Your healthcare team will talk to you about any special medical instructions.

You may have questions for your healthcare team, or you may not know what to ask. Here are samples of questions you may want to ask. Read these questions with your family and/or friends and add any of your own questions in the space provided.

- Who will I see at my follow-up appointment and when?
- Are there tests I need to have?
- When will my radiation related side effects go away?
- What do I do if something unexpected happens after I finished treatment? Who should I contact?
- Can nutrition help in my recovery?
- How long should I wait before planning a holiday abroad? Going back to the gym? Returning to work?
- I want to quit smoking, who can help me?
- How do I find out about support groups?
- I need some help at home, what services are available?
- Do I have my important contact numbers such as my oncologist and radiation therapists?

Questions for my treatment team:

Write them down here and bring this pamphlet with you to your last treatment appointment.

Other Sources of information

Once your treatment is finished, you can still access services at PMH. Also there are many useful organizations that you can contact. For more information, you can visit or contact the PMH Patient and Family Library.

PMH Patient and Family Library

(416) 946-2000 ext.5383, Main floor.

<http://www.uhn.ca/pmh/services/library.asp>

e-mail address: patienteducationpmh@uhn.on.ca

Canadian Cancer Society

(416) 488-5400 or toll-free at 1-800-268-8874

www.cancer.ca

Community Care Access Centre

Information about home care, long-term care destinations and other services in your community.

416 310-CCAC (310-2222)

www.ccac-ont.ca

Caring Voices

An Online community for cancer survivors with help and support.

www.caringvoices.ca

Healing Journey

(416) 946-2062

<http://www.healingjourney.ca>

Wellspring

(416) 961-1928 or Toll Free 1-877-499-9904

<http://www.wellspring.ca>

Gilda's Club

(416) 214-9898

<http://www.gildasclubtoronto.org/gc.php>

Important Contact information

Radiation Oncologist _____ Phone_____

Radiation Therapist _____ Phone_____