

# What to Expect When Getting High-Dose Rate (HDR) Brachytherapy to Treat Gynecological Cancer

## For patients with gynecological cancer

Read this pamphlet to learn:

- What is brachytherapy
- How to prepare for treatment
- What to expect when getting brachytherapy using an applicator
- What to expect when staying overnight at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre
- What to expect after brachytherapy



### **My schedule:**

Check in time: 6:00 am or 8:30 am

Where: Princess Margaret Cancer Centre,  
17th Floor B side

- Your treatment requires you to be admitted to hospital at two separate times.
- Both times you are admitted you will need to stay overnight.
- At each admission you will receive 2 brachytherapy treatments, as explained in the next section.
- Your 2 hospital stays will be 1 or more weeks apart.
- This schedule may change based on your internal anatomy (cervix, bowels, bladder and rectum).

**You will need to have blood work done the day before your first insertion.**

Location: Princess Margaret Cancer Centre – 3rd floor (Room 301)

### **My brachytherapy treatments will follow this schedule**

	<b>Mon</b>	<b>Tues</b>	<b>Wed</b>	<b>Thurs</b>	<b>Fri</b>
1st Insertion					
2nd Insertion					



**Important!**

**Please know that while your check-in time is 6:00 am or 8:30 am, your procedure may be in the afternoon. You still cannot eat or drink anything until after your procedure is finished. Also, your procedure time (morning or afternoon) may change from your first insertion to your second insertion.**

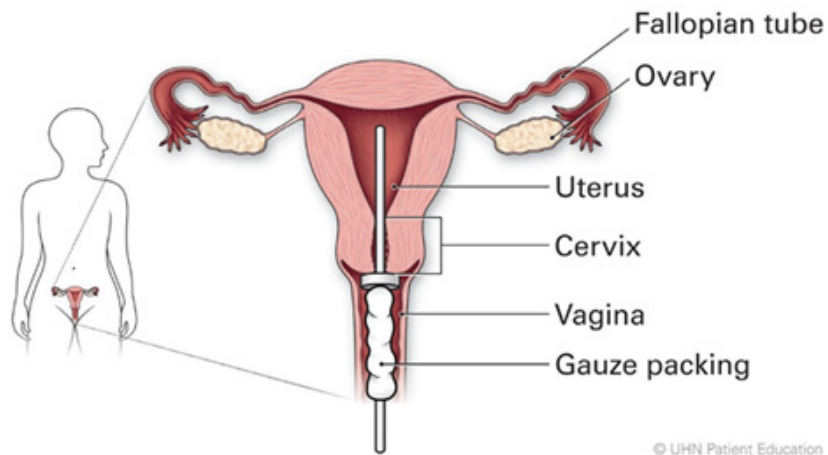
# What is brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy is a type of internal radiation treatment that uses an applicator to deliver radiation into or near your tumour. The treatment machine that stores the radiation is called a High-Dose Rate (HDR) unit. The radiation source travels into the applicator through a long tube that is connected to the HDR unit.

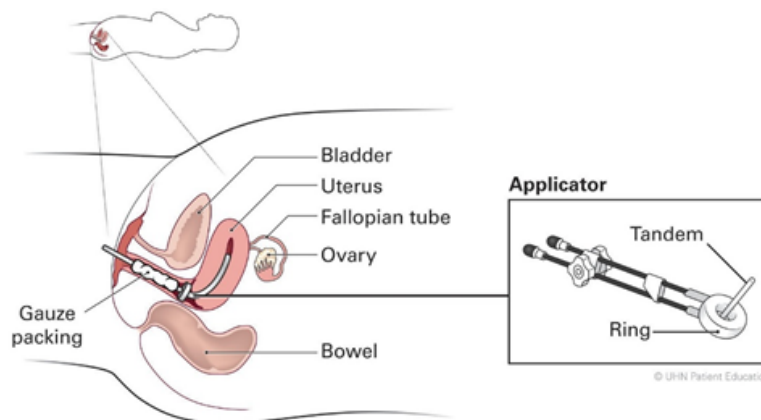
There are few types of applicators used for gynecological cancers. We will let you know which applicator is used before your procedure.

## Types of applicators

### 1. Applicator into the cervix and uterus

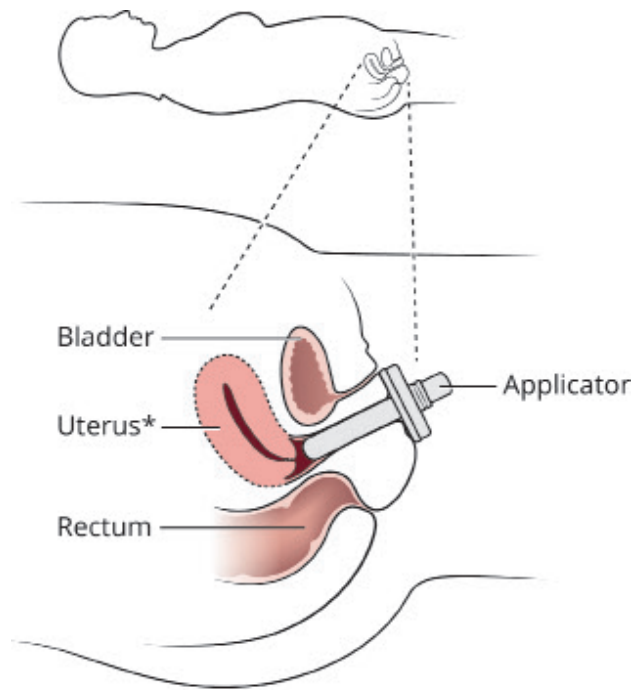


This image shows the position of the applicator inside your body.



The image on the left shows the position of the applicator inside your body. The image on the right shows what the applicator looks like.

## 2. Applicator into the vagina



*\* Some patients may not have a uterus*

## How do I prepare for my admission?

**On the evening** before your admission:

- Use a rectal fleet enema and make sure you have a bowel movement.
- Stop eating and drinking at midnight.

**On the morning** of your admission:

- Do NOT eat or drink anything until after your applicator is inserted.
- Do not take any diabetes medication on the morning of your procedure, but please bring your medication with you to the hospital.
- If you are taking anti-coagulant medication (blood thinner), please talk with your radiation oncologist.
- **Arrive at 6:00 am or 8:30 am.** The nurse will check you in. You will change into a gown and be taken on a stretcher to your procedure at your scheduled time.
- Bring all your medications to the hospital with you.
- Bring a rectal fleet enema in case you need to use it before your applicator is inserted.

Bring personal items, such as:

- toothbrush and toothpaste
- comb or brush
- soap
- lotion
- hot water bottle or heating pad
- tissues
- pajamas
- slippers
- socks

You can also bring items to help pass the time, like:

- books, magazines, newspapers
- crossword puzzles
- music
- movies
- a laptop or tablet
- cellphone or mobile device

There is free Wi-Fi available. Select the "UHN-Guest-WiFi" network. There is no password.

## **What happens during the applicator insertion procedure?**

- You are checked in by a nurse.
- An anesthesiologist will put an IV needle in your arm or the back of your hand. You will also speak to a radiation oncologist who will perform the procedure.
- You will be moved to a procedure table and receive a general anesthetic to keep you asleep during the procedure.
- A catheter (thin, flexible tube) is put into your bladder to collect your urine. A tube is also put in your rectum to help you pass gas.
- The proper applicator is inserted into the vagina, uterus or cervix. Other catheters may be placed in your tissue near the applicator. This will depend on your tumour.
- Light gauze packing may need to be put into the vagina. This keeps the applicator from moving.
- Your radiation oncologist may use sutures (stitches) to keep the applicator in place.
- When you wake up, you will need to lie down in bed with your legs straight.

## **After the procedure**

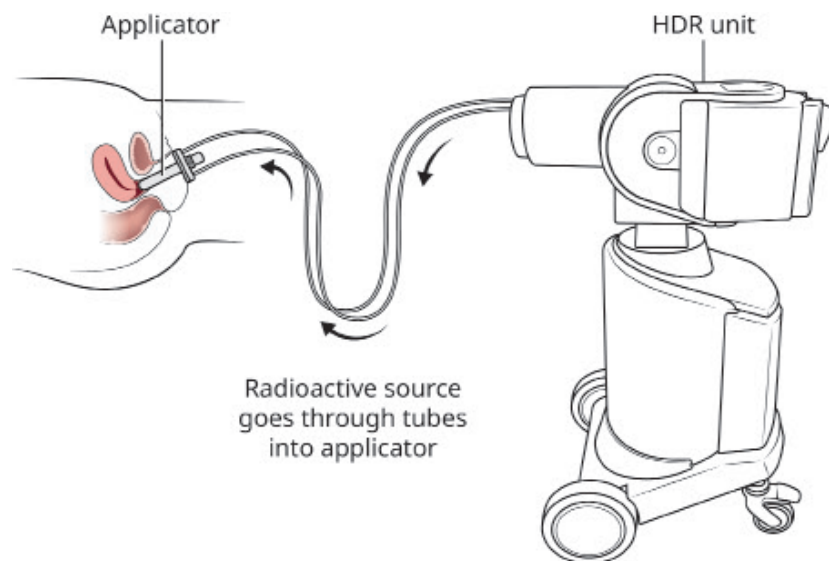
- You will go to a recovery room until you are fully awake. Then you will be returned to your inpatient room.
- You will then have an MRI. The MRI images will show the position of the applicator, the tumour and the areas around the tumour like the rectum, bladder and bowel.
- The images from the MRI help create a treatment plan that is right for you.
- It can take several hours to create your treatment plan. You will be in your room on the 17th floor during this time.
- While the applicator is inside you, you will need to lie flat on your back or on your side. Your head can be raised slightly.
- Once a treatment plan is ready, you are taken to the treatment room to receive the radiation.
- Once the radiation is delivered, you will return to your inpatient room.

**Important:** Your radiation oncologist may decide to insert the applicator, and do your MRI and treatment while you are asleep. If this happens, you will go to the recovery room after your treatment. We will tell you ahead of time if this is how your entire procedure will occur.

## What happens during my brachytherapy treatment?

To deliver the radiation we connect a long hollow tube from the applicator to the HDR unit. The radioactive source will travel from the machine through a connector tube and into the applicator. The radiation never touches you and cannot go into any other part of your body. You are never radioactive and it is safe to have visitors at the hospital and at home.

The treatment time can be up to several minutes. You will not feel any discomfort during treatment. The radiation therapists watch you on a TV screen and can speak to you and hear you through an intercom.



## **What happens after my brachytherapy treatment?**

After treatment you will stay on the inpatient unit. The applicator will stay inside of you overnight.

While the applicator is inside you, you will not be able to get up from your bed. You need to lie flat on your back with a pillow or 2 under your head or on your side. Some movement is allowed such as rotating your feet and ankles, raising your arms and rotating your wrists. We would like you to do deep breathing (long inhale through your nose and long exhale through your lips) at least once each hour. If you wish to be moved please ask your nurse. Do not try to move yourself as you can hurt yourself.

You will be on a low fibre diet during your stay in the hospital. This diet will help to stop you from having a bowel movement. We also encourage you to drink as much fluid as you can during this time.

### **What to expect when staying overnight:**

If you have any of these problems, please talk to your nurse.

You may feel:

- **Pain in your back**

Try placing a heating pad or hot water bottle to help relieve back pain. A nurse can place a pillow under your knees to relieve pressure from your lower back. Ask your nurse about taking pain medicine.

- **Pain or discomfort in your pelvic area where the applicator was inserted**

Ask your nurse about taking pain medicine.

- **Discomfort or burning in your urethra because of the catheter**

The lining of your urethra has become sensitive because of the external beam treatment. The discomfort or burning may subside, but if it increases please tell your nurse.

- **Bloating or stomach cramps**

We can give you medicine to help dissolve the gas.





**Tell your nurse right away if you feel the urge to have a bowel movement and you will be given medication to stop it.**

### **The morning after your treatment**

You will have another MRI to see if there are any changes in your tissue or the applicator. Your health care team will make a treatment plan for you.

The second treatment will occur usually in the early to mid-afternoon. After this second treatment, we will remove the applicator. You will be awake when this is done. We will give you pain medicine before we remove the applicator to help reduce any pain or discomfort.

### **Leaving the hospital**

You may be discharged from hospital when you are able to pass urine and generally feel well enough to leave.

In most cases, women feel well enough to go home shortly after the applicator is taken out after the second radiation treatment of each brachytherapy session. You and your doctor will talk about what is best for you.

After all your brachytherapy treatments are done you will receive a discharge package that includes:

- ✓ Information on how to manage vaginal stenosis and a dilator that you will need to use
- ✓ How to have a Sitz bath
- ✓ Eating hints if you are having diarrhea
- ✓ Information about sexuality and intimacy
- ✓ Your follow up appointment that will be made for you on the inpatient floor

## What other side effects should I expect from brachytherapy?

If you have just finished external radiation treatment and or brachytherapy, you may feel:

- Tired
- Sore in your pelvic area
- A burning feeling when you urinate
- Softer bowel movements or diarrhea
- Increased vaginal discharge

This list of possible side effects can be caused by having external radiation treatment and/or brachytherapy. Read about what you can try to help you to feel better:

You may feel	What to do
<b>Fatigue</b>	Read the pamphlet "Reclaim Your Energy: Coping with Cancer-Related Fatigue" for some tips on managing fatigue.
<b>Soreness in the genital areas</b> (Mainly, your outer labia. This is the tissue around the opening to your vagina.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A Sitz bath may help you feel better.</li><li>• We will give you a pamphlet after your last brachytherapy session with instructions on how to make a Sitz bath and how often you can use one.</li></ul>

You may feel	What to do
<b>Burning feeling when you urinate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drink 8 to 10 cups of water and other fluids like pure cranberry juice.</li> <li>• Avoid alcohol and drinks with caffeine such as coffee, tea and cola.</li> <li>• If the burning gets worse or you see blood in your urine, call your health care team or family doctor.</li> </ul>
<b>Softer bowel movements or diarrhea</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You may need to change to your diet and/or take medicines to treat diarrhea.</li> <li>• Ask your local pharmacy about medicine to control diarrhea.</li> <li>• We will give you a pamphlet after your last brachytherapy session called "Eating Hints for People with Diarrhea".</li> </ul>
<b>Increased vaginal discharge or bleeding</b>	<p>You may need to wear a light pad for the next 24 to 48 hours if notice vaginal discharge. There may be small amounts of blood. This is normal.</p>

**When can I have sex again?**

Radiation treatment can cause vaginal stenosis which is a narrowing of the vagina. Using a dilator in the vagina after your treatment will help to reduce the narrowing. Using the dilator is important as it can help reduce the discomfort of internal examinations and reduce pain during penetration, if you wish to return to having sex.

When you are done your treatments, your health care team will give you the dilators and explain how to use them. You will also get a pamphlet to take home that shows you how to use them.

## **Watch for these problems**



**Call your radiation oncologist or family doctor if you have any of the following symptoms:**

- Pain when you urinate and if you urinate more often than normal
- Blood in your urine or bowel movements
- Very painful stomachaches
- Lots of bleeding from your vagina (more than normal for you)
- Throwing up or nausea that stops you from eating for more than 24 hours
- Have diarrhea more than 3 times a day
- Shortness of breath or chest pain
- Leg swelling and increased redness and leg pain, usually in one leg

**If you cannot reach your radiation oncologist or family doctor, go to the nearest emergency department.**

## Notes

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Important phone numbers

Radiation oncologist: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Brachytherapy staff: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: 416 946 4642

Gyne resource nurse: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: 416 946 2220 ext. 2

Visit [www.uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://www.uhnpatienteducation.ca) for more health information.

Contact us to provide feedback or request this brochure in a different format, such as large print or electronic formats: [pfep@uhn.ca](mailto:pfep@uhn.ca)

---

© 2019 University Health Network. All rights reserved. Use this material for your information only. It does not replace advice from your doctor or other health care professional. Do not use this information for diagnosis or treatment. Ask your health care provider for advice about a specific medical condition. You may print 1 copy of this brochure for non-commercial and personal use only.