

What to Expect When Getting High-Dose Rate (HDR) Brachytherapy to the Pelvis Using an Intravaginal Applicator

For patients and families

Read this pamphlet to learn:

- What is brachytherapy
- How to prepare for treatment
- What to expect when getting brachytherapy using an intravaginal applicator
- What to expect after treatment is finished



Name: _____
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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 1 hour.

What is brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy is a type of internal radiation treatment where a “sealed” radioactive source is placed into or near your tumour 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? How many treatments will I have?

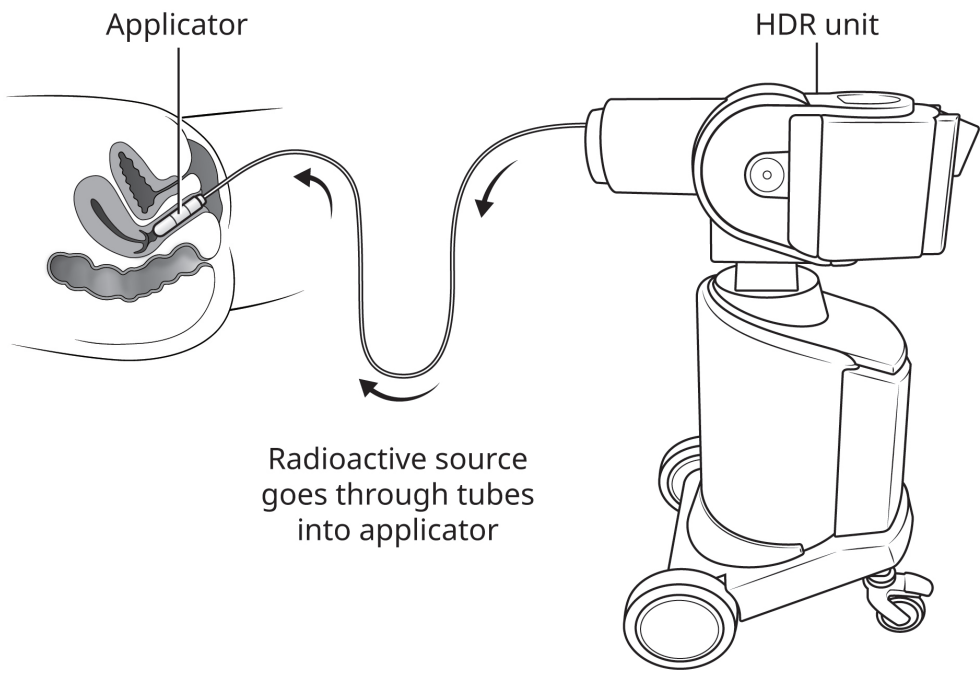
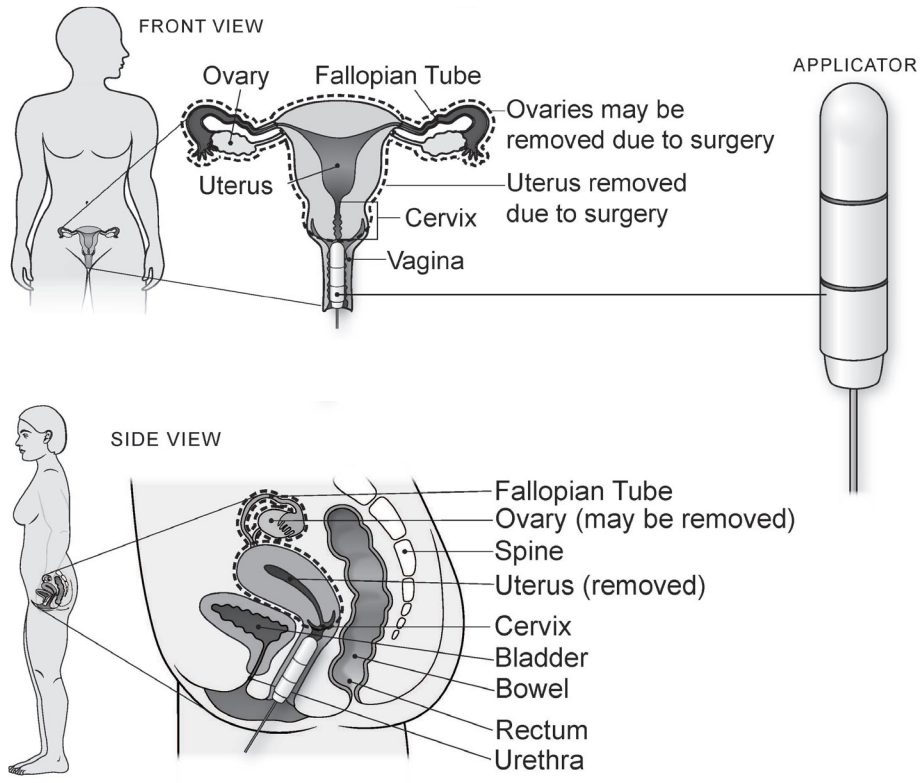
You can go home after each of your treatments. You will be in the hospital at Princess Margaret for about 1 hour. The treatment itself takes about 10 to 15 minutes. The treatment time needed to give your radiation dose is based on the measurements from your sizing appointment.

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

How will I receive my treatment?

Step 1: The applicator is inserted

- You will lie on your back, with your legs in stirrups.
- Your oncologist will examine your vagina and use a lubricant to place the applicator inside your vagina. 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 is attached to the applicator to prevent the applicator from moving.



HDR unit with tube attached and an applicator at the end of the tube that is inserted into the vagina

Step 2: The applicator is connected to the treatment unit

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

Step 3: Your treatment begins

- 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. If you do start to feel uncomfortable, your health care 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.
- Your radiation therapist or oncologist then removes the applicator.
- 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 be feeling 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 have. Continue to follow your health care team’s instructions until your symptoms get better. In general, side effects may continue for about 2 weeks after treatment is finished.

Remember: Write down the side effects you have and tell your health care team at your next appointment.

Possible side effects	What you can do
Soreness in the genital area (such as 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 (pee)	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-diarrhea medication, available from your local pharmacy.

How will I feel after my treatment?

You should not feel anything from the treatment. You may feel discomfort or mild pain when the applicator is inserted. Using some local freezing before insertion will help. You may be sore and tender in the pelvic area once you finish the brachytherapy 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 your last treatment. We will also give you 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.

When can I have sex again?

You can have sex 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 health care 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 health care team will talk to you about any special medical instructions.

You may have questions for your health care team, or you may not know what to ask. Here are some 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?

Notes or questions for my treatment team

Write down your questions and bring them with you to your last treatment appointment.

Other resources

Once your treatment is finished, you can still access services at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre. There are also other organizations that may offer services in your community. For more information, visit or contact the Princess Margaret Patient and Family Library.

Princess Margaret Patient and Family Library

Phone: 416 946 2000 ext. 5383

Email address: patienteducationpmh@uhn.ca

Canadian Cancer Society

Phone: 416 488 5400

Toll-free: 1 800 268 8874

Caring Voices

An Online community for cancer survivors with help and support.

Healing Journey

Phone: 416 946 2062

Local Health Integration Network (LHIN)

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

Important: This is not a full list of agencies and organizations. The University Health Network does not recommend one organization over another and is not responsible for the care and services provided. Some information may change. Please contact agencies or organizations directly to make sure the information is correct or to find out more about their services.

Visit www.uhnpatienteducation.ca for more health information.

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