

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: _____
Medical Record #: _____
Date: _____ Time: _____

For your brachytherapy, please check in at the Princess Margaret Hospital, Radiation Therapy Reception Desk on **Level 2B**. The whole procedure will take about 1 hour or less.

What is brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy (also called internal radiation) uses a radioactive source that is in a small capsule. The capsule is about the size of a grain of rice. The source is attached to a cable and stored in a treatment machine, called an HDR unit or “high-dose rate” unit.

To treat gynecological cancer, a special applicator is inserted in the vagina, called an intravaginal applicator. The applicator in the vagina is attached to the treatment unit by connector tubes, which allows the radiation source to travel into the applicator and deliver the radiation treatment. See image.

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?

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.

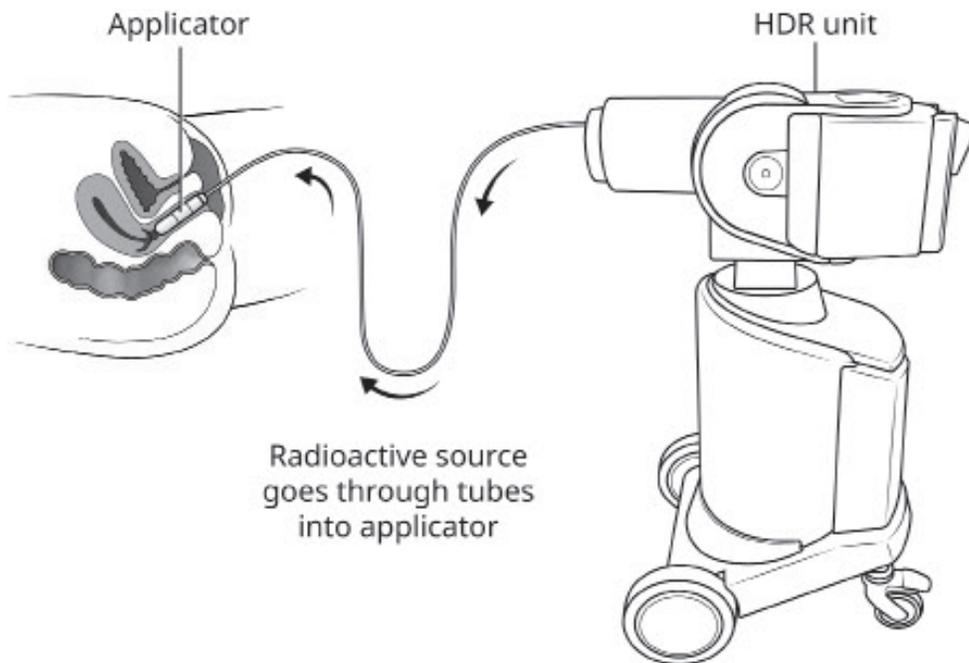
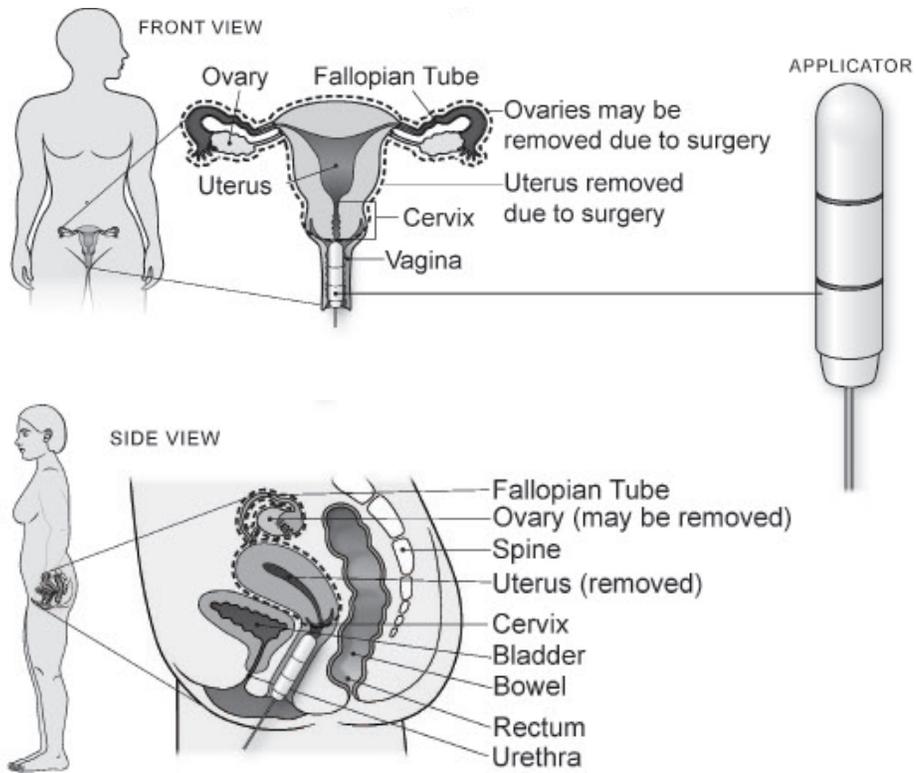
Your oncologist will decide how many treatments you will receive. Most patients have more than one treatment.

You can go home after each of your treatments. You will be in the hospital at Princess Margaret for about 1 hour or less.

How will I receive my treatment?

Step 1: The applicator is inserted

- You will lie on your back, with your legs in stirrups.
- Using lubricant, the applicator will be placed inside your vagina. If needed, a numbing gel can be used to reduce the discomfort of inserting the applicator. Please let your oncologist or radiation therapist 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 health care team will leave the room just before your treatment begins and will watch you on a TV screen. 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 already be feeling fatigue if you had external beam radiation treatment. The fatigue will continue with these brachytherapy treatments.

The table below shows the possible short-term 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
Bladder symptoms, including burning when you urinate (pee)	For burning, drink more fluids, especially cranberry juice
Bowel symptoms, including 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

Possible long-term side effects

Vaginal stenosis (shortening and narrowing of the vagina) and/or dryness is a long-term side effect of the treatment. It can happen months after your treatment is finished.

You can help to prevent or reduce vaginal stenosis by using a vaginal dilator after your treatment is finished. A vaginal dilator is a smooth plastic tube that is inserted into the vagina to reduce narrowing of the vagina after radiation treatment. A dilator will be given to you when you have your measurements done.

On your last day of treatment your radiation therapist will give you:

- a pamphlet called “How to Manage Vaginal Stenosis”
- instructions on how and when to use the dilator, and answer any questions you may have
- a dilator (if you have not received one already)

Other uncommon long-term side effects

Other uncommon long-term side effects may involve the bowel, bladder, or both. Someone on your health care team will discuss this with you.

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. Having some local freezing before the applicator is inserted will help. You may be sore and tender in the pelvic area once you finish the brachytherapy treatment.

A nurse will call you a couple of days after your last brachytherapy treatment, and again after 2 weeks, when it is time to start using the dilator.

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. We will give you a follow-up appointment at your last treatment.

When can I have sex again?

You can be sexually active when you feel ready. Most people find it helpful to use more lubrication during penetrative sex or masturbation. 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, nursing team and radiation therapists?

Notes or questions for my treatment team

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

Important contact numbers

Gynecology Radiation Resource Nurse: 416 946 2220 extension 2

- Call this number if you have questions about symptoms or how to use your vaginal dilator

Brachytherapy Office: 416 946 4642

- Call this number if you have questions about your brachytherapy treatment

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 | Website: <https://cancer.ca/en>

Phone: 416 488 5400 | Toll-free: 1 800 268 8874

Healing Journey | Website: <https://wellspring.ca/online-programs/programs/all-programs/healing-journey>

Home and Community Care Support Services

Website: <https://health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/lhin/facts.aspx>

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.



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