

Arden Cancer Centre

Radiotherapy Information for Patients having Intra-Uterine Brachytherapy (With Anaesthesia)

(Information current until December 2020)

What is Brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy is radiotherapy treatment that is delivered inside the body close to the tumour site. This will normally follow external beam radiotherapy.

It is given through specially designed hollow tubes called applicators, which are inserted into the vagina and uterus (womb). During treatment, a machine is used to place the radioactive material (usually iridium) inside the applicators. After the treatment, the radioactive material is withdrawn back into the machine and the applicators are removed. At the Arden Cancer Centre we have a High Dose Rate (HDR) brachytherapy machine.

Consent forms

Before you undergo this procedure you will be required to sign consent forms which indicate that you understand the treatment procedure and any possible side effects. Please tell us if you have any allergies including a latex allergy.

Preparation for Treatment

In order for the consultant to position the applicators, most patients require a spinal anaesthetic, although occasionally a general anaesthetic may be required. A spinal anaesthetic is when a small amount of local anaesthetic is injected into the fluid surrounding your spine, to temporarily 'freeze' the nerves and make your lower body and legs numb in order to undergo the brachytherapy procedure. In preparation for this we will need to do some



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tests before the end of your external beam radiotherapy treatment, this is known as a pre-operative assessment and is carried out in the out-patient department by a nurse. These tests may include blood tests, E.C.G. (heart monitoring) and a nasal swab. Some patients may also need to see an anaesthetist at this stage. Your doctor and the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists will discuss this further with you and arrange for an appointment to be sent to you.

You will also need an MRI scan towards the end of your external beam radiotherapy treatment, prior to the brachytherapy, which will be arranged for you.

You will usually be admitted to the Oncology Ward 35 the afternoon before your treatment takes place. Further blood tests will be done and an anaesthetist may visit you on the ward to check that you are well enough to receive an anaesthetic. They will advise you about your medication and you may be given additional drugs before you go to theatre. You will also be asked to fill in a separate consent form in order to agree to the anaesthetic and the positioning of the applicators. You may also be asked to take a pregnancy test, as this is a requirement for women of child bearing age when having an anaesthetic.

On the morning of the anaesthetic it is important to restrict your food and drink. Please see the timetable below:

Time before general anaesthesia	Fluid or food intake
From midnight	No Solid food, milk, chewing gum. Please do not smoke.
Midnight to 6am	Clear fluids (black coffee/tea, squash, preoperative carbohydrate drink)
6am to 7am	Sips of water

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Theatre procedure:

- On the day of your treatment you will be taken down to the hospital theatres at about 8.30am where you will be given an anaesthetic. The doctor inserts applicators into the vagina, cervix and womb at this time. The number of applicators used can vary, sometimes some very thin applicators are also used which may be referred to as needles. It normally takes about 45 – 60 minutes to do this.
- In theatre you will also need to have a urinary catheter inserted into your bladder because once the applicators are in place, you need to stay in bed and cannot walk around.
- Following the procedure you will be taken in your bed to Recovery. Once you have been monitored by the recovery nurses for a short period, you will be taken to the Arden Cancer Centre. There you will have a CT scan and / or an MRI scan of your pelvis to check the position of the applicators, in order to plan your treatment.
- You are then taken back to the ward whilst your treatment is being planned, and offered food and drinks. **You must stay in bed** during this time so that the applicators do not move from their position in the vagina. You will also need to lie quite flat with only one pillow.
- You may experience some pain or discomfort as the anaesthetic wears off. **Please ask the ward nurses for pain relief as often as you need it.**

Treatment

Whilst you wait on the ward your consultant plans the treatment with a physicist / dosimetrist, this can take several hours. When the treatment plan is ready (usually late afternoon / evening), you will be collected from the ward in your bed and taken to the brachytherapy treatment room in the Arden Cancer Centre.

Once in the treatment room the applicators are connected to the brachytherapy treatment machine, the staff will leave the room and treatment will begin. The brachytherapy treatment team will be able to see you at all times via a television monitor. Generally, treatment lasts between 5 and 20 minutes. You will not feel anything from the treatment itself. Please be aware that we have both male and female staff working in brachytherapy.

When the treatment is complete, the applicators and the catheter will be removed straight away. This only takes a few minutes but can be quite

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uncomfortable. Additional pain relief is available in the form of Entonox gas (gas and air). There will be some bleeding from the vagina when the applicators are removed. Usually this is only slight but we will take you back to the ward on your bed and ask you to stay in bed for 30 minutes, by which time the bleeding will have reduced. You will not need to go back to theatre unless there is a lot of bleeding, which is rare. You will need to stay in the ward until you are fully recovered from the procedure, but usually you can go home the same day.

Complications

Occasionally, during the insertion of the applicators in theatre one of the applicators can go through the wall of the womb, this is known as a perforation. The doctors may not know that this has happened until they look at the CT and MRI scans. The perforation will heal itself in time and is unlikely to cause you any problems but it would be necessary for you to have antibiotics and to stay in the ward overnight. When a perforation occurs it may be possible to continue with the brachytherapy treatment, but sometimes we are unable to give treatment that day and the applicators will be removed.

Will I feel sick?

Nausea and vomiting are rarely a problem, and are usually related to the anaesthetic. Anti-sickness medication will be prescribed as required. Eating light meals and drinking plenty of fluids should help.

Going home after treatment

- You will need a friend or relative to take you home
- You will be discharged home from the ward when the nursing staff consider that you have recovered from the procedure
- If you have had a spinal anaesthetic you will need a nurse present when you first get out of bed and stand up.
- You may experience slight bleeding after the treatment. This normally stops after a few days. If you are concerned please contact the Brachytherapy Radiographer, Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists or the Ward (see numbers below).
- You may be given some tablets to take home with you in case you experience any diarrhoea.

What are the side effects of brachytherapy?

Side effects are normally classed as acute (early) or long term (late).

Acute side effects:

- You may feel the need to pass urine more often than normal and this may be associated with a stinging sensation. If this persists take a urine sample to your GP and drink plenty of fluids.
- You may experience episodes of diarrhoea, an urgent need to open your bowels and occasional rectal bleeding. Medication can be prescribed for you to help with the diarrhoea.
- Vaginal dryness and soreness can also occur, along with some bleeding from the vagina. This will be assessed before you leave the hospital.
- Vaginal discharge is common. If this is excessive see your GP or contact the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist: **024 7696 7290**
- Fatigue can be a common effect of radiotherapy. If you feel tired you may need to rest, but evidence has shown that gentle exercise can help. More information on this is available from Macmillan Cancer Support.
- The above side effects should resolve in time and settle 4 to 6 weeks after the completion of your brachytherapy treatment.
- In young women with functioning ovaries, radiation treatment to the pelvis will result in infertility. This is because the treatment brings about an early menopause. However, **contraception in the form of a condom should be used for at least 3 months following treatment.** You may require some Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) after treatment is complete. Your Consultant will discuss this with you.

Long term side effects:

These may occur months to years after completion of treatment and may include: -

- Vaginal narrowing - whether or not you are sexually active you will be given a letter to take to your GP to get a pack of vaginal dilators prescribed. These are used to maintain the opening of the vagina, which makes future clinical examinations and sexual intercourse more comfortable for you. This will be discussed with you in more detail when you come for treatment. If you have not received the letter or have any

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difficulties getting the dilators, please let the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist know.

- Vaginal dryness - you will need to use a vaginal lubricant when intercourse resumes and whilst using the vaginal dilators.
- Bladder changes - can include frequency, reduced bladder capacity and blood in the urine.
- Bowel changes - can include diarrhoea, urgency, narrowing of the bowel and bleeding from the rectum.

Very rarely bladder or bowel fistulae can develop (this is an abnormal opening between two adjacent organs that are not normally connected). There is about a 1% to 2% chance of this happening.

These long-term changes can be irreversible and **may** need investigation and management. Very rarely, if complications become sufficiently severe, surgical referral and intervention has to be considered.

There is a booklet giving detailed information about potential late side effects, entitled “Managing the late effects of pelvic radiotherapy in women” produced by Macmillan Cancer Support. Please ask your doctor or radiographer if you would like a copy.

Follow up appointments

When your course of treatment is complete, you will receive a follow-up appointment in an Out- Patient clinic for about six weeks. This is to monitor your progress and response to the treatment and for the management of any side effects that you may be experiencing. If you haven't received this within three weeks of completing treatment please telephone the Arden Centre reception on 024 7696 7272

If you have any problems before your follow up appointment please contact the Brachytherapy Radiographer on 024 7696 7294 or Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist on 024 7696 7290.

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Useful telephone numbers

Brachytherapy Information and advice:

Monday – Friday 9.00am – 5.00pm

Brachytherapy Radiographer: **024 7696 7294**

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists: **024 7696 7290**

Arden Cancer Centre – Monday to Friday 9.00am-5.00pm

Radiotherapy Reception: **024 7696 7272**

Oncology Ward 35: 024 7696 5525 or 024 7696 5528 or 024 7696 5531
(24 hour emergency advice only please)

Information and Support

Macmillan Cancer Information Centre is situated on the Ground Floor, University Hospital in the main entrance.

The Centre is staffed by a Cancer Information Nurse Specialist, and offers free confidential support and information on types of cancer, treatments, living with cancer, controversial issues, support groups and other organisations.

You can visit the Centre or telephone: 024 7696 6052

The Centre is open: Monday to Friday 9.00am to 4.00pm (excluding Bank Holidays)

National telephone number 0808 808 00 00

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

You may find these booklets from Macmillan Cancer Support useful:

- Understanding Cancer of the Cervix
- Understanding Cancer of the Uterus
- Understanding Radiotherapy
- Pelvic Radiotherapy in Women – managing side effects during treatment
- Managing the Late Effects of Pelvic Radiotherapy in Women

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Patient satisfaction

We hope that you have found this booklet helpful.

We welcome your comments on the care that you experience, and the service that we offer within the Arden Cancer Centre.

We ask that specific complaints be addressed to a member of staff so that, in line with University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust complaints policy, they can be dealt with quickly and efficiently.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

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