



# High Dose Rate (HDR) brachytherapy to the vaginal vault

Radiotherapy

# Contents

Introduction.....	1
What is brachytherapy? .....	2
Where is the treatment given? .....	2
What to expect.....	3
Combination of treatments.....	4
Possible side effects after your treatment .....	5
Possible late side effects.....	5
Follow-up .....	6
Additional information.....	6
Useful contact details.....	7



This information leaflet is for patients who are going to receive brachytherapy treatment to the vaginal vault.

**It is a treatment given:**

- To boost the dose of radiation to the tissues of the vagina as part of a treatment plan that includes External Beam Radiotherapy (EBRT). The treatment is usually given in 1 session during the last week of, or within a few days after, your course of EBRT treatment.
- On its own for some patients as the preferred treatment choice. In this instance, 3 treatments are usually given a few days apart.
- To treat disease that has returned after surgery. 2 treatment sessions are usually given.

Your oncology doctor will discuss why brachytherapy is being offered to you.

This information leaflet will explain the procedure and the most common side effects you may experience.

## What is brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy delivers radiation into body cavities or tissues using hollow tubes known as applicators and is ideal to treat tissue that is close to the applicator. An applicator is put in place just before each treatment session. The radiation comes from a small solid radioactive source that is stored in a specialised treatment machine.

## Where is the treatment given?

Brachytherapy treatment is carried out in the Brachytherapy Suite at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral.

During your course of EBRT treatment you will have 'on treatment review' appointments. At one of these appointments, we will discuss your brachytherapy treatment, including who will do it. It will be either your oncology doctor or the brachytherapy specialist radiographer. If you want to discuss any aspect of your brachytherapy again before your treatment appointment, please inform your treatment radiographers who will contact an appropriate member of staff.

If you are having brachytherapy only, your doctor will discuss the treatment with you during your clinic appointment.



## What to expect

Brachytherapy is a day case treatment, so you need to be at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral by mid-morning. However, if your general health/circumstances are such that treatment as an inpatient is preferable, this will be arranged and you will be admitted to the ward.

You do not need to do any special preparation prior to your brachytherapy appointment; please eat and drink normally before you attend.

The procedure takes about 15 minutes or less and will be explained beforehand. If possible, wear a loose skirt or dress rather than trousers. A relative or friend may come with you.

The procedure is very similar to having an internal vaginal examination. You will be asked to lie on the bed and will be examined and an applicator gently placed into your vagina. Once the applicator is in position, you will need to stay lying on your back with your legs flat and will be covered up from then until the end of the procedure.

The applicator needs to be in close contact with the far end of your vagina. To ensure it does not slip out once in place, we will fasten the applicator onto a small holder. You may have a slight feeling of discomfort within your vagina. However, it is important to stay still and not to move away from the applicator.

The radiographers will leave the room to complete some checks which take a few minutes. They will then come back into the room to connect the applicator to the machine. They do not stay in the room while you are having your treatment, but they can see and hear you all the time via a microphone and CCTV. At the start of treatment, the radioactive source moves from the machine into the applicator. You will not feel anything, but you will hear some noises from the machine. Treatment takes about 5-10 minutes.

When the treatment has finished, the radioactive source automatically returns to the machine. The applicator will be removed by either a nurse or radiographer and you can leave.

## Combination of treatments

The effects from brachytherapy alone are relatively mild. If you have also had EBRT, there are side effects relating to this which are detailed in the 'Radiotherapy to the female pelvis' patient information leaflet.

## Possible side effects after your treatment

After your treatment, you may experience some side effects. These symptoms are normal and should last a few days only. However, if they continue or worsen, you should contact your GP.



## These may include:

- 'Spotting' (slight bleeding) or discharge from the vagina. These symptoms are normal. If the discharge becomes smelly, you may have an infection and may need antibiotics: see your GP
- Pain and/or discomfort when you empty your bladder (cystitis). It is important to drink plenty of fluids, as this will help to soothe the bladder
- You may have the sensation of needing to empty your bowels, but then only have small movements or just pass mucus and wind. This is called tenesmus and happens as a result of irritation to the rectum

## Possible late side effects

Brachytherapy treats only the tissues that are close to the applicator. It is possible that scar tissue will slowly develop in these tissues. The majority of treatment-related effects appear within the 1st or 2nd year, but can start to up to 5 years later. The treatment can cause the vagina to narrow and shorten and become less elastic (stretchy) in comparison to before treatment. This may cause discomfort or pain during sex or an internal examination. The regular use of a vaginal dilator (dilators are tubes that are inserted the vagina for a few minutes on a regular basis) will help to prevent vaginal narrowing and their use is recommended, even if you are sexually

active. The use of dilators will be discussed and you will be offered a pack, together with additional written information.

Dryness of the vagina may also become a problem. If you are sexually active, the use of water-based lubricating gel can be helpful.

## Follow-up

It is important to attend your follow-up appointments. You will be given your follow-up appointment after your treatment or later through the post. If you do not receive an appointment letter within 2 weeks, please contact your oncology doctor's secretary. The first appointment is usually about 6 weeks after finishing treatment.

## Additional information

The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre patient information leaflets:

- Radiotherapy booklet
- Radiotherapy to the female pelvis
- Use of vaginal dilators when receiving radiotherapy to the pelvis

Macmillan booklets about coping and living with cancer and treatment side effects are available free of charge. These can be ordered by telephoning 0808 808 0000 or by visiting a Macmillan Information Centre (sited in the main entrances of Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral and Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree).



## Useful contact details

The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - 0151 556 5000

- Brachytherapy Clinical Specialist Radiographer 0151 556 5342
- Gynaecological Cancer Clinical Nurse Specialist 0151 556 5134

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

tel: 0800 808 0000

### **Macmillan Cancer Information and Support at:**

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Wirral 0151 556 5570

Clatterbridge Cancer Centre - Aintree 0151 556 5959

### **Clatterbridge Cancer Centre Hotline 0800 169 5555**

If you are unwell during or up to 8 weeks following your cancer treatment please call the Clatterbridge Cancer Centre Hotline.

Your call will be answered by a dedicated nurse advisor. This line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.





## How we produce our information

All of our leaflets are produced by staff at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre and this information is not sponsored or influenced in any way. Every effort is made to ensure that the information included in this leaflet is accurate and complete and we hope that it will add to any professional advice you have had. All our leaflets are evidence based where appropriate and they are regularly reviewed and updated. If you are concerned about your health in any way, you should consult your healthcare team.

We rely on a number of sources to gather evidence for our information. All of our information is in line with accepted national or international guidelines where possible. Where no guidelines exist, we rely on other reliable sources such as systematic reviews, published clinical trials data or a consensus review of experts. We also use medical textbooks, journals and government publications.

References for this leaflet can be obtained by telephoning 0151 556 5570.

If you need this leaflet in large print, Braille, audio or different language, please call 0151 556 5570.

**If you have a comment, concern, compliment or complaint, please call 0151 556 5203.**

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