

Intracavitary Brachytherapy for Gynecological Cancer

For Cervical and Endometrial Cancer Patients



Radiation Treatment

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Questions about treatment?

Call your Brachytherapy Office or Nurse
(Mon to Fri, 8:00 am – 4:30 pm)

- **Calgary (RT nurse)** _____
- **Edmonton** **780-432-8475**

If you are going to Daysurgery NOT being admitted (Outpatient)

- **Calgary:** Call the day before your treatment between 2 and 5 pm to confirm your check in time **403-944-4484 or 403-944-4485**
- **Edmonton:** call **before 3:30pm** the day before your treatment appointment **780-432-8951**

If you are being admitted for an overnight stay for your treatment, please do the following:

- **Calgary:** call the day before your treatment appointment between 2 and 5pm to confirm your check in time **403-944-2812 or 430-944-2813**
- **Edmonton:** call the day before your treatment appointment **780-432-8951**

A

Radiation Treatment

1) What is radiation treatment?

Radiation is a treatment for cancer that destroys cancer cells by stopping them from growing and dividing. The types of radiation treatment are:

- **External radiation** — the radiation is produced by a machine and aimed at the tumour, so it comes from outside of the body.
- **Internal radiation** — the radioactive source is placed inside the body, either inside the tumour, or close to it.

2) What is brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy is internal radiation treatment, and means “short distance” — the radiation source is **close to or inside** the patient.

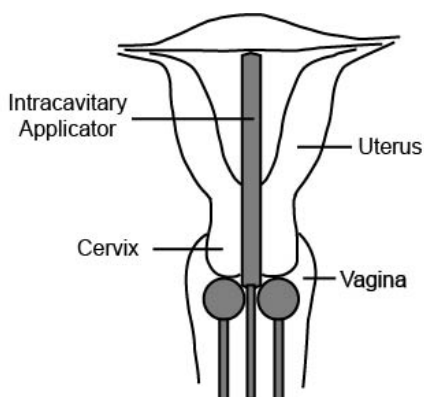
There are different ways to give brachytherapy and the type used depends on the part of your body that needs treatment.

The type this booklet looks at is called **Intracavitary brachytherapy**.

3) What is Intracavitary brachytherapy?

It is a way of delivering a high dose of radiation to a very small area.

The Radiation Oncologist places a small, hollow applicator inside the vagina, through the opening of the cervix, and into the uterus. This is done in the operating room.



During treatment, a radioactive source goes into the applicator and delivers the radiation treatment to the area the Radiation Oncologist wants to treat.

Your Radiation Oncologist will talk to you about how you will get your treatment. Check off the option you are getting:

- Inpatient** — you stay in the hospital overnight. This treatment is given in the hospital over 3 to 5 days by alternating treatment and breaks.

During breaks, you can have nursing care and visitors. Normally for this treatment, you only need to have the applicator inserted once.

- Outpatient** — This treatment is given a few times, usually 1 week (7 days) apart.

At each treatment appointment, you will need to have the applicator inserted. Appointments can take several hours from start to finish.

Sometimes **interstitial brachytherapy** is given at the same time as intracavitary brachytherapy. **Interstitial brachytherapy** is an internal radiation treatment given by placing small needles into the body. Your doctor will give you more information if you are getting this treatment.

B Preparing for the Treatment

Tests

You may need to have some tests done before you have this treatment. This could include blood work, a chest X-ray, and an electrocardiogram (ECG). Your Radiation Oncologist will let you know if these tests are needed.



Once you know your brachytherapy appointment date, arrange for someone to drive you to your appointment and pick you up. By law you cannot drive for 24 hours after having anesthetic.

The night before treatment:

- Have nothing to eat or drink after midnight (12am)
- Empty your bowels using a Fleet enema or Pico-salex

Ask your health care provider
which product you should use:

Fleet enema

Or

Pico-salex

The day of treatment:



Ask your nurse which of your prescription medications you can take with a sip of water.

What to bring:

- Something to do — you can read, watch TV, listen to the radio, and other quiet activities while in bed.
- Government ID and your health care card.
- Someone to drive you home.
- A pair of socks to cover your feet — your blanket will not be able to cover your feet.

C

During Treatment



You will need to put on a hospital gown. Your clothes and valuables will be put into:

- Your hospital room (for inpatient treatment).
- A locker — you will have the key (for outpatient treatment).



- You will get an IV (intravenous line).
- The Anesthetist will decide if you will have a **general anesthetic** (be asleep) or a **spinal anesthetic** (numbness from the waist down).
- After your anesthetic, you will have a catheter placed in your bladder.

1) Inserting Your Applicator



Your Radiation Oncologist will place the applicator inside your vagina and secure it with gauze packing.



Depending on your treatment, you will either have a CT Simulation scan or an MRI scan. These scans help plan your treatment such as how much radiation to

give you, and for how long. These calculations can take more than 2 hours (120min) to do.

2) Your Radiation Treatment

Whether you have your treatment as an **inpatient** or as an **outpatient**, your radiation treatment will be similar:

- A tube will connect the applicator to the treatment machine.
- To avoid radiation exposure to staff, everyone will leave the room during the treatment.
- Staff will monitor you using an intercom (voice) system, and a video camera system.
- When the machine is turned “**on**”, the radioactive source will travel from the treatment machine through the tubing, and into the applicator.
- The applicator delivers the radioactive source to the treatment area.



Each treatment will take between 15 to 40 minutes.

Alarms



You may hear an alarm during treatment. Alarms can sound for many reasons and will stay on until your treatment team shuts it off and fixes the problem.

D

After Your Treatment

- A staff member will enter the room to check that the radioactive source has returned to the treatment machine.
- The applicator will be removed.
- You will get discharge instructions and may go home with your companion.
- You may take Tylenol® (acetaminophen) if you have discomfort.
- You may have some vaginal discharge or bleeding, which should stop after a few days. Wear a pad, but do **not use a tampon**.
- You are **not** radioactive after treatment.

E

Managing Your Side Effects

Side effects depend on many things, including how much radiation you receive. Everyone is different and experiences the side effects differently.

1) Fatigue

You may feel tired (fatigued) as a result of your treatment. This tiredness usually goes away in a few days to weeks.



For more information on how to manage cancer-related fatigue:

<https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/cancer-fatigue.aspx>

2) Vaginal Irritation

Irritation to the lining of your vagina can cause discomfort with sex, and can take weeks to improve. If there is no infection, you can start having sexual intercourse as soon as you feel up to it.

Try using a water soluble lubricant or vaginal moisturizer for comfort. If you have any difficulties returning to your usual sexual practices, tell your nurse, Radiation Therapist or Radiation Oncologist.



- You can email your questions to: sexandcancer@ahs.ca
- Visit <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/HealthTopics/cancer-and-sexuality>

3) Vaginal Tightening

Over time, the radiation treatment can cause the vagina to narrow and shorten. You will get instructions and a vaginal dilator to help with this.

Vaginal dilators help:

- Keep your tissues soft and able to stretch
- Make sexual activity more comfortable
- Stretch your tissues for physical examinations



Wait 2 to 4 weeks before you use your dilator after **brachytherapy treatment**, unless your Radiation Oncologist tells you otherwise.

4) Infection

There is a small risk (less than 1%) of infection after you get this treatment. If you develop an infection, you will get antibiotics.

Go to the nearest Emergency Room and tell staff you had brachytherapy treatment if you have:

- **Heavy bleeding**
- **Abdominal pain**
- **Fever:**
38.0°C/100.4°F to 38.2 (100.8°F) for at least 1 hour

OR

38.3°C/100.9°F or higher at any time



F

Follow-Up

Your follow-up care is very important. Your Radiation Oncologist will see you after you finish your brachytherapy treatment.

Ask your Radiation Oncologist:

- When you will have your next follow-up appointment
- How often you will have follow-up appointments

G

Your Brachytherapy Team

- **Radiation Oncologist** – a medical doctor who treats cancer using radiation.
- **Medical Physicist** – a specialist who helps plan the treatment and ensures the quality of the implant.
- **Radiation Therapist or Brachytherapist** – delivers radiation treatments, and helps you before, during and after the implant.

- **Dosimetrist** – a radiation therapist who specializes in the treatment planning for radiation.
- **Anesthesiologist** – a medical doctor who provides you with care during your implant and recovery. They may talk to you about the medications you take before and after the implant.
- **Nurse** – may help in the operating room, on the inpatient ward, and during your recovery.

H

Information for Inpatient Treatment

How long will my treatment be?

If you are having inpatient treatment, your time in the hospital can range from 3–5 days. You must stay in bed for your entire stay in the hospital. Nurses are available 24 hours to help you with any care you need.

What if I need to move?

Your nurse or Brachytherapist will show you how to move (log roll) so the applicator stays in the same position.

What happens at treatment?

- You will have an IV to give you fluids and medications.
- You will get a blood thinner to prevent blood clots.
- You will get treatments followed by breaks for time for patient care.
- During your break you can have nursing care and visitors in the room.

What if I have to go to the bathroom?

- You will have a catheter in place to drain your bladder.
- You will be on a low residue diet to prevent bowel movements. Your nurse can give you medication to prevent the urge to have a bowel movement.



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