

Vaginal Vault Brachytherapy

For Cancers in the Pelvis



Radiation Treatment



Cancer Control Alberta

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Introduction

This booklet describes High Dose Rate (HDR) vaginal vault brachytherapy treatment. It is a treatment option available for some women:

- Who have had surgery to remove their uterus and cervix
- With vaginal, cervical or endometrial (uterine) cancer

There are many ways of treating cancer. Consult with your doctor to choose the option that is best for you.

Questions about treatment?

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

- **Calgary (RT nurse)**

- **Edmonton 780-432-8475**

1) What is radiation treatment?

Radiation is a treatment for cancer that destroys cancer cells by stopping them from growing and dividing.

There are 2 types of radiation treatment:

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

2) What is brachytherapy?

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

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

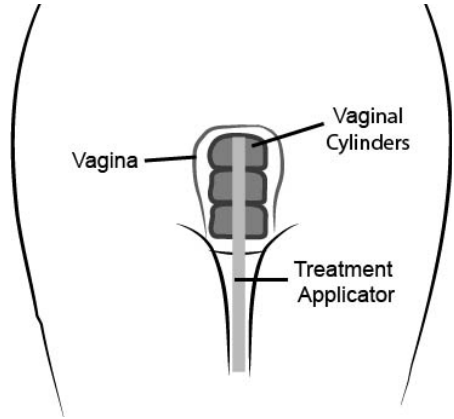
This booklet looks at **vaginal vault brachytherapy**.



3) What is vaginal vault brachytherapy?

Vaginal vault treatment involves placing a small, hollow applicator inside the vagina.

The applicator is shaped like a cylinder, is made of plastic, and feels smooth and a bit cool. The applicators come in different widths and lengths. Your Radiation Oncologist will choose the right size of applicator for you.



The insertion of the treatment applicator is done in a special radiation treatment room. The applicator will be secured in place for each treatment.

What happens during the treatment?

A radioactive source travels inside the applicator, and stays there for several minutes. During this time, the radioactive source delivers the radiation treatment to the area the Radiation Oncologist wants to treat.

How often will I have treatment?

Most patients will have 3 to 5 treatments. Treatments can be given on consecutive business days either:

- **Daily** – Monday to Friday
- **Weekly** – 7 days apart

Your Radiation Oncologist will talk to you about which option you will have.

B

How the Treatment is Done

1) Before the brachytherapy insertion

- You may eat before treatment.
- You may drive yourself to and from this appointment.
- Take your prescription medications as usual.
- You will be asked to put on a hospital gown.
- Bring your government ID and health care card.

2) Inserting the applicator

- During the insertion, you will lie on your back with your legs supported by stirrups. You will stay in this position until the treatment is done.
- Your Brachytherapist or Radiation Oncologist will place the applicator inside your vagina. You may feel some pressure inside the vagina while the applicator is in place.



3) During your treatment

Each treatment will take several minutes to deliver, **but your entire appointment will take longer.**

What you can expect:

- It is important for you to lie still during the treatment.
- 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 video cameras and an intercom (voice) system.
- The radioactive source will travel from the treatment machine through the tubing, and into the applicator. You may feel the tubing move a bit during this time.
- The radioactive source will pause as it moves through the applicator to deliver the treatment.
- The machine will make some noise.

C

After your treatment

- When the treatment is done, the radioactive source will return to the treatment machine.
- A staff member will come in and scan the room with a radiation detector.
- The applicator will be removed.
- **You are not radioactive** after this treatment.
- You may have some vaginal discharge or bleeding, which should stop after a few days. Wear a pad, but do **not use a tampon.**

D

Managing Your Side Effects

Side effects depend on many things, including how much radiation you get. Some people getting this treatment will also get external beam radiation treatment. Having both kinds of treatment can make side effects more intense.

1) Fatigue

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

2) 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.

3) 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.

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



E

Follow-Up

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

Ask your Radiation Oncologist:

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



F

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 insertion.
- **Radiation Therapist or Brachytherapist** — delivers the radiation treatments, and helps you before, during and after the insert.
- **Dosimetrist** – a radiation therapist who specializes in the treatment planning for radiation.
- **Nurse** – may help in the operating room and during your recovery.



