

Information for
patients & families

Vaginal Vault Brachytherapy



Treatment – Radiation

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 is 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. This is also called brachytherapy.

What is brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy is a type of **internal radiation** treatment where a radiation source is temporarily placed inside the patient using a treatment applicator. Different kinds of treatment applicators can be used to treat different types of gynecological cancers.

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



Your Brachytherapy Team

- **Radiation Oncologist** – cancer doctor for radiation treatment who prescribes your treatment and helps you manage any side effects.
- **Medical Physicist** – specialist of medical physics who helps plan the treatment.
- **Radiation Therapist** – delivers radiation treatments, and helps you before, during and after the treatment.
- **Dosimetrist** – a radiation therapist specializing in the treatment planning for radiation.
- **Nurse** – may provide education and help during your clinic visits.

How many treatments will I have?

Most patients will have 1–5 treatments.

How often will I have treatment?

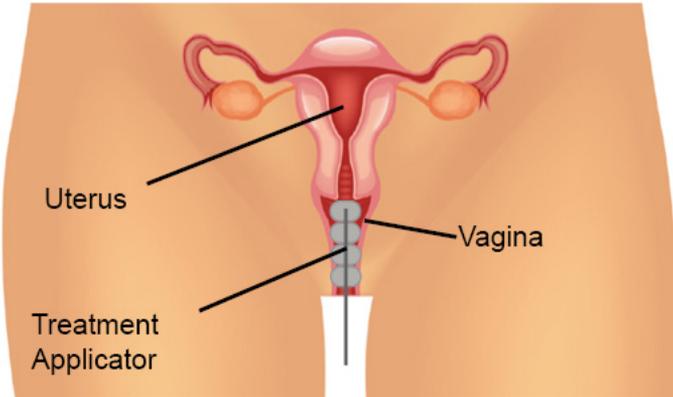
Treatment schedules can be different for different people. Usually, treatment is given:

- **Daily** – where you would have treatment for several days in a row
- **Weekly** – where you would have treatment 7 days apart

Your radiation oncologist will talk with you about the schedule that is needed for your treatment.

What is vaginal vault brachytherapy?

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



The applicator is shaped like a cylinder, 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 the Treatment is Done

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.
- You may be asked to drink fluids to fill your bladder before you come to your appointment. Your radiation oncologist will let you know if you need to do this.

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.

During Treatment

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

Your brachytherapy treatment

- A tube will connect the treatment 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), and 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 machine may make some noise.
- You will not feel anything when the radiation treatment is delivered.
- The applicator delivers the radioactive source to the treatment area.



After Your Treatment

Removing the radiation source

The radiation source has a thin wire attached to it, which is used to return the source to the treatment machine when the treatment is finished. You will not feel any discomfort as the source is moving through the applicator and tube.

Removing the treatment applicator

- 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 may have some vaginal discharge or spotting of blood.
- You are **not** radioactive after treatment.

Follow-Up Care

Your follow up care is very important. You will have a follow-up appointment with your radiation oncologist about 6–8 weeks after your treatment is complete. Your radiation oncologist will continue to see you.

Managing Your Side Effects

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

There are some common side effects after the treatment. You may:

- Feel tired or fatigued
- Vaginal irritation and discharge

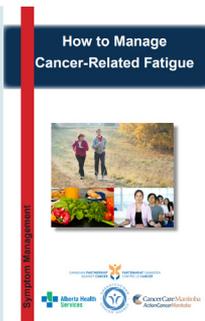
These symptoms may increase for 1–2 weeks after the treatment, but should begin to improve by the 3rd week.

Fatigue

You may feel tired (fatigued) as a result of treatment. This tiredness usually goes away in a few days to weeks. Light to moderate exercise can help.

Get more tips to help with fatigue:

- Read “How to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue”
- Watch the video series:
<https://myhealth.alberta.ca/alberta/cancer-fatigue>



Vaginal Tightening

Over time, radiation treatment can cause the vagina to narrow and shorten. Read the ‘Using a Dilator’ booklet for helpful tips and instructions on how to use a dilator.

Vaginal dilators help:

- Keep your tissues soft and able to stretch.
- Prevent adhesions that can cause the walls of the vagina to stick together. This can make pelvic exams and sexual intercourse painful.
- Make sexual activity more comfortable.
- Stretch your tissues for physical examinations.

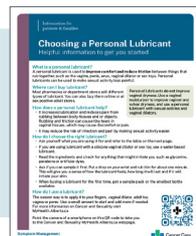


Wait 6–8 weeks to use your dilator after treatment, unless your radiation oncologist tells you otherwise.

Vaginal Irritation

Irritation to the lining of your vagina can cause discomfort with sex, and can take weeks to improve. Try using a water soluble lubricant or vaginal moisturizer for comfort. If there is no infection, and you feel up to it, you can start having sexual intercourse 4–6 weeks after the treatment.

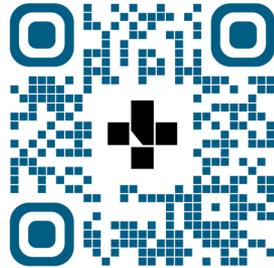
Get more tips and check out the “Choosing a Personal Lubricant” handout.



Sexual Activity

Sexual function can vary after the treatment. It may take time before your sexual function returns to how it was before the implant. You may need medication. If you have any problems returning to your usual sexual practices, talk to your healthcare team.

- You can email your questions to: sexandcancer@ahs.ca
- Visit [MyHealth.Alberta](https://myhealth.alberta.ca) and search Cancer and Sexuality



Living Your Best

Supportive Care

Cancer Care Alberta Psychosocial Oncology

Difficult emotions often happen during cancer and its treatments. Experts can offer counselling to patients and family members to help reduce emotional distress and explore coping skills. They help with things such as communication, stress, coping with treatment side effects, mood changes, quality of life, body image or loneliness.

- Support groups give people living with cancer an opportunity to interact with others in similar situations. Some are led by healthcare professionals while others are led by community members.

For resources and Supports for People with Cancer, visit: <http://bit.ly/ccagettinghelp>

Canadian Cancer Society – Peer Support Program

The Canadian Cancer Society's Cancer Connection program is a support network that offers peer-to-peer support to cancer patients and their caregivers. You can talk with caregivers or current and former patients with your same type of cancer. Call 1-800-263-6750 or visit www.cancerconnection.ca.

What if I need medical treatment to my pelvis after my brachytherapy implant?

If you need future medical treatment, especially abdominal surgery, the doctor may wish to have information about your brachytherapy implant.

- Call your radiation oncologist about any concerns related to future treatment.
- If needed, your radiation oncologist can discuss any concerns with your doctor.

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The information is to be updated every 3 years, or as new clinical evidence emerges. If there are any concerns or updates with this information, please email cancerpatienteducation@ahs.ca.



For your next appointment

- Bring this booklet
- Arrive 15 minutes early
- Bring a list of your medications
- Bring a list of questions

For other Cancer Care Alberta resources,
visit cancercarealberta.ca



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