

Post-operative Internal High Dose Rate (HDR) brachytherapy for gynaecological cancers

In the clinic today, you and your doctor have agreed that you are going to have radiotherapy treatment for your cancer. This leaflet explains what you can expect during and after your treatment and gives you some general advice and information.

Introduction

You will be given time to discuss any concerns with the radiographer (a person trained to give radiotherapy) at your first appointment.

The Berkshire Cancer Centre is a training centre, so you may meet radiography students who may be involved with the delivery of your treatment under close supervision.

You will be contacted by telephone to arrange an appointment for your radiotherapy treatment. If you have not been called by the Radiotherapy Department by a week after today's appointment, then you can contact us on: Telephone: 0118 322 7872, Monday-Friday 8.30am-5.00pm. If you are already having external beam radiotherapy you will be given a print out of the HDR brachytherapy appointment dates the week before you complete the external treatment.

Why post-op internal HDR brachytherapy?

If you have had external beam radiotherapy (that is treatment given from outside the body) to the pelvic area for cancer of the endometrium (lining of the womb) or cervix and/or are due to have internal high dose rate (HDR) brachytherapy treatment, then this leaflet will explain what to expect during the internal treatment process. The reason internal treatment is recommended for you is that it decreases the chances of recurrence of your disease at the vault (roof) of the vagina.

If you have any questions please ask your doctor or nurse.

What are the benefits of radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy works by using high energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. Our bodies are made up of different cells, and all cells have the ability to divide and grow. If radiation hits a cell that is dividing, it will be damaged. Unlike normal cells, cancer cells are much less able to repair the damage, which means that more of them will be destroyed.

You will be given two to four appointments for the internal radiotherapy. If you have received external beam radiotherapy then these appointments will normally be around one and two weeks after your external treatment finishes.

When recommending HDR Brachytherapy, your doctor will have taken into account the risks and benefits of the treatment. Although there are risks and side effects, it is felt that the advantages for you outweigh the disadvantages.

Your first HDR treatment

When you attend, please go to the Radiotherapy Planning waiting area in the Berkshire Cancer Centre (North Block, Level 1). The radiographers call you in when they are ready for you. **If you have a pacemaker, you must notify the radiographers prior to treatment.** Once in the CT room, you will be asked to lie on the treatment couch, where the doctor will carry out an internal vaginal examination. After this, the doctor will gently insert an applicator called a 'vaginal cylinder' into the vagina. This applicator is shaped like a large plastic tampon. There may be some discomfort whilst the applicator is positioned. The applicator is attached to a hollow tube that leads out of your vagina, between your legs. This hollow tube is then secured to a special fixing on the treatment couch to ensure that it is held in exactly the right place during treatment. A CT scan will be taken to ensure that the applicator is the correct size and in the correct position. A female radiographer will chaperone (or accompany) you during this whole procedure.

You will then be taken to the HDR treatment room on the couch. The applicator will be connected to the HDR machine using a flexible transfer tube. At this point, the radiographers will leave the room. The radiographers will be able to see you with the CCTV cameras and a monitor at their workstation throughout treatment delivery. You will hear the machine beeping throughout the treatment but will not see or feel anything. You will be in the treatment room for approximately 20 minutes in total. However, the radiographers will only be out of the room for around 5-10 minutes. When the treatment is finished, the radiographers will re-enter the treatment room and remove the applicator. You will then be able to go home.

Subsequent appointments

An internal vaginal examination is not required for subsequent appointments as the size of the applicator is already known. Subsequent insertions may be carried out by the radiographer.

How will I feel afterwards?

For a few days, following the HDR treatment, it is possible you may experience some vaginal spotting or discharge. It is advisable to bring some sanitary pads with you for use after the treatment. You may also experience some side effects such as diarrhoea, pain in the rectum (rectal tenderness), discomfort passing urine (radiation cystitis) and tiredness (fatigue).

If you are concerned about these side effects please contact the Review radiographer on 0118 322 8869 or the gynaecological clinical nurse specialist on 0118 322 8195 who are both contactable 9am-5pm Monday to Friday. Outside these hours please contact your GP.

What other side effects can I expect?

Both external and internal radiotherapy will cause changes to the vagina, including: vaginal scarring (fibrosis), shortening and tightening of the vaginal space (stenosis) and the walls of the vagina may stick together (adhesions). To reduce the risk of these side effects happening, the radiographers will explain how to use the vaginal dilators. An information sheet about this will also be given to you.

Possible long-term side effects are: increased bowel frequency, increased bladder frequency, reduced bladder capacity, pain in the bowel due to scarring/adhesions, bleeding and/or excess mucus from the rectum (back passage), passing blood in the urine, or urine leakage.

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Side effects, such as bowel blockage, leakage or incontinence or development of a small hole in the vaginal wall (fistula), are much less common.

Please speak to the radiographers treating you, the medical staff at your appointments, or your clinical nurse specialist if you have any concerns or questions about these possible side effects.

Follow up appointment

You will be given a follow up appointment to see your oncology doctor 4-6 weeks after completing your HDR treatment.

Contact details

Berkshire Cancer Centre: 0118 322 7888 (9am-5pm)

Radiotherapy Clinic: 0118 322 7890 (9am-5pm)

Macmillan Cancer Information Centre: 0118 322 8700

Lisa Clarke (Clinical Nurse Specialist): 0118 322 8195

Lisa Revans (Review Radiographer): 0118 322 8869

Further information

Macmillan Cancer Support Tel: 0808 808 0000 www.macmillan.org.uk

Hospital Patient Advice & Liaison (PALS) Team Tel: 0118 322 8338 or email PALS@royalberkshire.nhs.uk

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.
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Lisa Revans: Gynaecological Review Radiographer, April 2021. Next review due: April 2023