

Internal Radiation for Cancer in the Uterus or Vagina

You will have internal radiation as part of your treatment for cancer in the uterus or vagina. Your cancer care team may call the treatment brachytherapy. This factsheet tells about the treatment and how to prepare for it. It also tells about side effects and ways to manage them.

What is internal radiation?

Doctors place a source of radiation near the cancer for a short time. The radiation is focused on the cancer cells. This helps protect healthy cells in the rest of your body. Most patients need more than one treatment session, with 1–3 days between each. The first treatment may take at least 2 hours. Later treatments take less time.

What to Bring

- You may want to bring something to read or watch. You will be in bed for 1-2 hours for the first treatment.
- You may have family or friends at your bedside.

When You Arrive

The treatment takes place in the Radiation Oncology clinic at Huntsman Cancer Hospital (HCH). It is on the first floor of the hospital.

The radiation team will talk with you about these things:

- Details of the treatment
- How many treatment sessions you will need
- Possible side effects and how to manage them
- Risks of the treatment

They will ask you to read and sign a consent form.

Preparing for Treatment

1. The radiation doctor will put a device into your vagina or uterus near the tumor or area to be treated. There is no radiation in the device until later.
2. The radiation doctor will use a CT scan to make sure the device is in the right place.

After the device is in place, you wait in your bed while the doctors set up the radiation source. This takes 1–2 hours. You may have family or friends at your bedside while you wait.

You must stay in bed until the device is removed after the treatment. The head of the bed may be raised only slightly.

You need to stay as still as possible to keep the device in place. Avoid sudden twisting and turning.

The Radiation Treatment

When the radiation doctors are ready, you will go to the treatment room.

1. The radiation team will attach a tube from the machine to the device and leave the room.
2. When the machine is on, you will be the only person in the treatment room. The radiation team stays in contact by intercom and video.
3. The radiation doctor turns on the machine. A small radiation source about the size of a grain of rice goes into the device for 10–20 minutes. You may feel the radiation source moving. This is the only time you are exposed to radiation.
4. After the treatment is done, the radiation source goes back into the machine. The radiation doctor turns the machine off. The radiation team takes the machine's tube from the device.
5. The radiation team removes the device. You can go home.

For treatments after the first one, the 1–2 hours of waiting is not necessary. The radiation treatment can start as soon as the device is in place and connected to the radiation source.

Follow-up Appointments

After completion of the radiation course, you will have a follow up appointment with your radiation oncologist every 3 months, alternating with your gynecologic oncologist.

Possible Side Effects of Internal Radiation

You may have some side effects that last for a while after your internal radiation treatments are finished. Your cancer care team can give you medicines and tips to help manage them:

- Pain
- Fatigue
- Diarrhea
- Painful urination
- Fluid from your vagina

Pain. The treatment area may be sore. You may take acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen sodium, depending on what your cancer care team recommends. They can give stronger pain relievers if needed.

Fatigue. Feeling tired, or fatigue, is a common side effect of radiation treatments. For the first day or two after the treatments are complete, get lots of rest. Many patients find that mild exercise such as walking can improve energy levels. Avoid impact sports, bike riding, or strenuous activities for one month after the last treatment.

Diarrhea. You may have more frequent bowel movements or diarrhea, which is loose, watery stools. Tell your cancer care team if you have diarrhea. They can suggest diet and medicines to help.

These tips may help with diarrhea:

- Use alcohol-free baby wipes rather than toilet paper to wipe or pat softly after bowel movements.
- Rinse the anal area with water using a squirt bottle after each movement.
- Treat the anal area if it becomes sore or if you get hemorrhoids. Over-the-counter hemorrhoid products can help. Sitting in a warm bath with water above the hips may also help.

Painful urination. It may hurt when you urinate. Drink at least 8 cups of liquid each day. This will help with the soreness and help prevent a bladder infection. If burning goes on for more than 24 hours or you get a fever, tell your cancer care team. They will check for infection. They can give you medicines to ease pain.

Fluid from your vagina. It is normal for a little fluid to come from your vagina for 4–6 weeks after the last treatment. At first, the fluid may be light pink, then light brown or tan, then white. You may douche gently once or twice a day with a quart of plain, lukewarm water. Tell your cancer care team right away if you have heavy flow, bright-red blood, or foul-smelling fluid.

These side effects may go on after your last treatment. If you have concerns, please talk with your cancer care team.

Changes to Your Vagina

Radiation can cause dryness and shrinking of the vagina. This can make it hard for your doctors to do follow-up exams. It is important to gently stretch the vagina by having regular sexual intercourse or using a dilator. You can start having intercourse again as soon as it's comfortable for you. This is usually about 2–3 weeks after the last treatment. A water-based lubricant may be helpful. If you have sexual relations less than two times per week, you should use a dilator. The radiation oncology team will talk with you about this.

When to Call for Help

Call your cancer care team right away if any of these things happen:

- Painful urination for more than 24 hours
- Fever higher than 100.3° F
- Heavy or bright-red bleeding from your vagina
- Foul smell from your vagina

Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.–5 p.m.

Radiation Oncology 801-581-2396

After hours, weekends, and holidays

801-587-7000

Ask for the radiation oncologist on call.