



Brachytherapy for cancer of the cervix and uterus (intravaginal)

This leaflet explains what happens when you have brachytherapy to your cervix and uterus. It is a guide to help you understand more about this type of treatment and the procedure involved. The cancer specialist is in charge of your care. In this leaflet they will be referred to as the oncologist. The oncologist in charge of the brachytherapy will see you some time before your treatment, and explain the procedure to you.

You will also have the chance to discuss your treatment beforehand with the brachytherapy radiographers. If you wish, you can see the room where the treatment is given.

You could be seen by both male and/or female radiographers when you have your treatment.

What is brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy is a form of radiotherapy given by directly introducing a radiation source into the part of your body to be treated. The brachytherapy machine uses a small radioactive source which produces gamma rays.

Brachytherapy may be given:

- on its own
- after surgical treatment of your cancer such as hysterectomy
- after external radiotherapy from a linear accelerator
- after both surgery and external radiotherapy.

Your oncologist will discuss with you the best treatments for you. Patients normally receive two or more treatments of brachytherapy, which are given as an outpatient.

Can I eat before and after my treatment?

Yes. You may eat and drink normally before and after your treatment.

CT planning

- You will have a CT scan of your pelvis a few days before your treatment starts. This appointment will last about half an hour. We will ask you to empty your bladder and then drink a measured amount of water before your scan.
- A small plastic treatment applicator will be placed into your vagina and held in position by an external clip attached to the couch so that it does not move. As these applicators come in a range of sizes you will be given one that is comfortable for you.
- The radiographers will then carry out a CT scan of your pelvis. This shows the position of your bladder and back passage (rectum). This is so we can calculate the amount of radiation that you will receive from the treatment.

Your first treatment

- For your treatment, the vaginal tube is simply placed in position before starting the treatment.
- When the treatment is ready to start, the radiographer will connect the tube in your vagina to the brachytherapy machine using a guide tube.

- The radioactive source will travel along this tube by remote control once the brachytherapy machine is switched on. You will not feel any of this, as it happens inside the tubing.
- The staff will leave the room whilst the treatment is being given. You will be watched via a closed circuit television. There is also an intercom so the radiographers can speak to you during your treatment.
- Once the treatment is finished, the applicator will be removed. The radiographers will arrange your future appointments with you.
- This procedure takes between 20 - 30 minutes. The treatment time, when the radioactive source is placed in you, takes between 5 - 10 minutes.

What happens after my first treatment?

You should not feel unwell after this treatment, but you may notice slight discomfort the first time you pass urine.

How many treatments will I need to have?

Patients normally have two or more treatments after the planning scan. The CT scan is only needed before the first treatment.

What side-effects may I expect?

You should not feel unwell after your brachytherapy but sometimes you can get a urine infection. If you have continued discomfort on passing urine you should contact your GP (family doctor). There may also be a slight vaginal discharge for a few days.

In the longer term the most common side-effect is a narrowing and scarring of the vagina.

Before your treatment finishes, the staff will explain to you about using vaginal dilators.

Sometimes the scarred areas have very fine surface blood vessels. These can cause spotting of blood after you have an examination in the clinic and sometimes after you have intercourse.

You should inform your oncologist or family doctor (GP) of any unexpected bleeding, which is usually nothing to worry about. Similar changes may cause minor bleeding from the bladder and bowel.

On very rare occasions some patients may have more serious long term bowel or bladder upset. This is more likely to happen if this treatment is combined with external radiotherapy.

The majority of patients (about 90%) will have no significant long term effects from this treatment. But there is a 5% risk of more serious side-effects developing at a later date, which may interfere with your lifestyle.

Ask your oncologist to explain what this means for you.

What follow-up will I need after my brachytherapy?

About two - three weeks after your course of brachytherapy is finished, the radiographer will telephone you at home to check your progress. After this you will be seen either at your local hospital, or regularly by your family doctor (GP).

If at any time after your treatment has finished you have any concerns about any ongoing medical problems or discomforts, please contact your GP or your oncologist at Mount Vernon Hospital.

It is quite normal to be concerned about the sexual implications of this type of treatment. We have specially trained members of staff who may be able to help you.

If you feel you need to talk to someone, please ask your radiographer to arrange this for you.

We hope you find this information helpful. However the brachytherapy staff will always do their best to answer any questions you have about this treatment.

If you have any queries about the information in this leaflet, please contact the brachytherapy unit (see below).

Contacts

If you have any queries about the information in this leaflet, please contact the:

Brachytherapy Unit: 020 3826 2629

At other times, call the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre 24-hour Emergency Advice Line: 07825 028855

Consent

It is a legal requirement to have a signed Consent Form from you before the start of your treatment.

If you have already been given one of these forms, please bring the completed form with you when you come for your first appointment.

If you have not been given a form, this will be discussed with you at your first appointment.

Identification

Please note that it is a legal requirement for the staff to check your name and details against your treatment sheet and your hospital name band each time you attend. You must wear your name band at all times whilst in hospital.

If you normally pay for NHS prescriptions

People undergoing treatment for cancer do not have to pay NHS prescription charges if they have a valid medical exemption certificate.

To get an exemption certificate, ask your GP for an application form.

Pregnancy

Patients must not be pregnant or become pregnant during a course of radiotherapy or for some months afterwards. **Please discuss this with your cancer specialist.**

If you think there is a chance, however small, of you being pregnant during treatment, it is extremely important that you discuss this with your oncologist, radiographer or nurse as soon as possible.

You will be asked to confirm your pregnancy status prior to radiotherapy. This applies to all women between the ages of 12-55 years. This is a legal requirement.

Other help and support

People who have cancer often say that during their illness they experience a range of emotions. Many find it to be a stressful, anxious and confusing time.

If you would like further information about any aspect of cancer and its treatments, including the supportive services offered at the LJMC, please drop in to the centre or call the Helpline.

The staff at the LJMC work as part of the overall team caring for you and include healthcare professionals and trained volunteers. The centre provides a relaxed setting in which to talk and ask questions.

The LJMC is situated between the main Cancer Centre building and Gate 3 (White Hill).

 **Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre**
... supporting people affected by cancer...

Services offered at the LJMC include:

- ① Drop-in centre
- ① Telephone helpline
- ① Benefits advice*
- ① Complementary therapies*
- ① Relaxation classes
- ① Counselling*
- ① Look Good...Feel Better™ beauty workshops
- ① The Way Ahead headwear workshops
- ① Self-help courses

* These services are only available to NHS patients under the care of an oncologist based at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

Mon-Fri: **9.30am–4.30pm**

Telephone Helpline: **020 3826 2555**

Website: **www.ljmc.org**