Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Intravaginal Brachytherapy

This information will help you get ready for intravaginal brachytherapy. It will help you know what to expect before, during, and after your treatment. It will also help you learn about side effects and how to care for yourself during treatment.

Read through this resource at least once before you start intravaginal brachytherapy. Use it as a reference in the days leading up to your treatments so you can prepare as much as possible. Bring this resource to all future appointments with your radiation oncologist. You and your healthcare team will refer to it throughout your treatment.

About Intravaginal Brachytherapy

Brachytherapy is a type of radiation therapy. Radiation therapy kills cancer cells by making it hard for them to multiply.

With brachytherapy, a radioactive source is temporarily placed inside your body, inside or near the tumor(s). This means that the tumor gets a large amount of radiation, while nearby healthy tissue gets less radiation and is less likely to be damaged. With intravaginal brachytherapy, the radioactive source is placed in a cylinder that's placed in your vagina.

Most people get a total of 3 treatments that last about 5 to 15 minutes each. Your radiation oncologist may change the timing or number of the treatments. They will talk with you about what to expect.

Before Your Treatment

You don't need to do any special preparation before your treatment. You can eat and drink as usual.

When you arrive for your treatment appointments, a staff member will ask you to take off any clothing below your waist and change into a hospital gown. They will also ask you to empty your bladder. Then, they will bring you into a treatment room.

During Your Treatment

Once you're in the treatment room, your doctor will do a pelvic exam. They will place the cylinder into your vagina. The cylinder is the same shape as a tampon, but bigger. You may feel some pressure while it's in place. Your doctor will attach a cable to the cylinder. The cable is connected to a machine that stores the radiation source. Then, an x-ray scan will be taken to make sure the cylinder is in the right place.

Once everything is set up, the staff will leave the room and close the door. A computer will send the radioactive sources through the cable and into the cylinder. You will be alone in the room during your treatment, but the staff will able to see you on a monitor and hear you through an intercom at all times.

It's important to lie still during your treatment so the cylinder doesn't move. Because the radioactive sources are placed inside the cylinder, you won't feel them. However, if you're uncomfortable or need help, tell your radiation therapists. They can turn off the machine and come in to see you at any time, if needed.

After your treatment is done, the radioactive sources will move back into to the machine. Your doctor will then remove the cylinder.

You don't need to follow any special precautions after your treatments. You can leave the hospital right away. Neither you nor your clothes will become radioactive during or after treatment. It's safe for you to be around other people.

Side Effects

After each of your treatments, you may have 1 or more of the following side effects:

- Pinkish discharge from your vagina
- A feeling of pressure or burning when you urinate (pee)
- A feeling of pressure when you have a bowel movement (poop)

These side effects are expected. But, if they don't get better after 2 days, call your doctor or nurse.

You may also have vaginal dryness, tightening, or both. These side effects may start during your treatment and last after your treatment is finished. For information about managing these side effects, read the resources below. You can find them online, or you can ask your nurse.

- *Improving Your Vulvovaginal Health* (www.mskcc.org/pe/improving_vulvovaginal_health)
- *How To Use a Vaginal Dilator* (www.mskcc.org/pe/vaginal-dilator)
- *Pelvic Floor Muscle (Kegel) Exercises for Females* (www.mskcc.org/pe/kegels-females)

If you would like more support and information about sexual health and intimacy, please talk with your healthcare provider about Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK)'s Female Sexual Medicine and Women's Health Program. For more information about the program, or to make an appointment, please call 646-888-5076.

Follow-up Appointments

Be sure to keep your follow-up appointments with your radiation oncologist. During these visits, your radiation oncologist will evaluate your response to treatment. You may have blood tests, x-rays, and scans during these visits.

Before each follow-up appointment, write down your questions and concerns.

Bring this and a list of all your medications to your appointment. If you're running low on any medication you need, tell your radiation oncologist before you run out. You can also call your radiation oncologist or nurse at any time if you have any questions or concerns.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns, talk with a member of your healthcare team. You can reach them Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the numbers listed below.

Radiation oncologist: _____
Phone number: _____

Radiation nurse: _____
Phone number: _____

After 5:00 p.m., during the weekend, and on holidays, call _____ and ask for the radiation oncologist on call. If there's no number listed, or you're not sure, call 212-639-2000.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor or Nurse

We recommend that you write down the questions to ask during your visit with your doctor or nurse. Write down the answers during your appointment so that you can review them again later.

What kind of radiation therapy will I get?

How many treatments will I get?

What side effects should I expect during radiation therapy?

Will these side effects go away after radiation therapy is finished?

What kind of late side effects should I expect after radiation treatment?

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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