

High Dose Rate (HDR) Vaginal Cuff Radiation Therapy

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

You and your doctor have chosen High Dose Rate (HDR) radiation therapy as part of your treatment for cancer. Before each treatment a small hollow tube (applicator) will be placed into the vagina to give radiation to the vaginal cuff. The vaginal cuff is the top of your vagina that was stitched closed after your hysterectomy.

This handout describes:

- What to expect during the treatment.
- How to care for yourself during the treatment.
- How to reduce side effects.

Planning and First Treatment

Before treatment begins, you will be scheduled for a planning session. It will take about 1 hour. During this session you will have a CT scan that will help target the radiation treatment area.

Schedule

After your planning CT scan, you will be scheduled for your first treatment. The treatments are given Monday through Friday. Your nurse will work with you to set up needed appointment times. While the actual treatments take only a few minutes, plan to allow an hour for:

- Meetings with your doctor or nurse.
- Any unexpected delays.

X-rays are done before each treatment to make sure the applicator is in the correct place. Your treatment and side effects are checked during these visits. Any concerns about your disease and treatment can be discussed at this time.

First Treatment

You may eat or drink normally the day of the procedure.

When you arrive, the nurse will escort you to the dressing room where there is a locker with a key for your use. You will be asked to remove all clothing from the waist down and change into a hospital gown.

From there you will go to the HDR treatment room. The nurse will assist you onto an exam table. You will be covered with a sheet. Your legs will be put into stirrups that support you under the knees and calves. Then, the lower half of the table will be removed.

What to Expect

Your doctor will do a vaginal exam to:

- Check that the vaginal cuff is healed.
- Select the applicator size for treatment.

The doctor will place the applicator in your vagina. Your legs will be brought down to lie straight on the table. The applicator will lock into place on the table so it will not move.

X-rays will be taken to look at the position of the applicator. Your doctor and nurse remain in the room while the pictures are taken. Your doctor may reposition the applicator based on the X-rays.

You may listen to music on a CD player provided or bring your iPod®.

During the Treatment

Once the placement of the applicator has been checked, the treatment will begin. One end of a flexible tube is attached to the radiation machine. The other end is connected to the applicator that is in place inside you. Your doctor controls the machine from a room outside the treatment room. You will not feel anything during the treatment, but you may hear the sound of the machine. The treatment takes about 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

When the treatment is done, the doctor will remove the applicator and the nurse will tell you when you will have your next treatment.

You may have a small amount of spotting (blood from the vagina) for the rest of the day. Call your doctor immediately or the clinic at 312-926-2520 if you have large amounts of bleeding.

Follow-up Treatments/Appointments

For each of the remaining sessions:

- You will still change into a hospital gown and be in the same position on the exam table.
- Appointments will last about an hour.

Your doctor will usually want to see you for follow-up about 1 month after the final treatment. You may schedule this follow up exam with the nurse.

Possible Side Effects

Diarrhea

You may have some diarrhea after the procedure but it is generally mild. If you have diarrhea tell your doctor or nurse. Be sure to contact them if you have diarrhea 4 or more times in a 24-hour period. This can lead to dehydration. Your doctor or nurse may suggest a low fiber diet. If your doctor prescribes Imodium[®] AD (loperamide hydrochloride):

- Take 2 tablets with the first loose stool.
- Then take 1 tablet after any other loose stool that day.

Do not take more than 8 tablets a day.

Be sure to stay well hydrated during treatment. You should drink at least eight 8-ounce glasses or 64 ounces of non carbonated, non-caffeine fluids, such as water, juice, or sports drinks daily.

Fatigue

While fatigue is a common side effect after any type of radiation, it is not expected to be overwhelming for this targeted treatment.

Vaginal Discharge

It is common to develop some vaginal discharge during radiation treatments. The discharge may be white or yellow and may be thick or thin. As needed, wear a panty liner. Tell your doctor or nurse if you:

- Have a lot of discharge.
- Notice the discharge has an odor.

This could be a sign of a vaginal infection which would require medicine. While you may notice some vaginal spotting, you should not have heavy bleeding. If you develop bleeding that is heavier than a menstrual period, let your doctor or nurse know right away.

Vaginal Dryness and Stenosis

Radiation treatments can cause scar tissue to form in your vagina. This decreases the size and length of your vagina (vaginal stenosis). Scar tissue is less elastic than normal tissue. As a result, you may have discomfort during vaginal exams and intercourse. After you finish your treatments, your nurse will give you a vaginal dilator and talk about its use. The dilator will help you break up any scar tissue and help decrease stenosis. After your treatments are completed, you may also notice some vaginal dryness. Using water based lubricant, such as K-Y[®] jelly or Astroglide[®] can ease discomfort during intercourse.

After pelvic radiation, some women also report having a difficult time reaching orgasm. If you have any problems resuming intercourse, discuss it with your doctor or nurse. They can refer you to a trained health care provider who can assist you with your sexual concerns.

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the 3rd floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the 1st floor of the Prentice Women's Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nmh.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at www.nmh.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312-926-3112.

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For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at www.nmh.org.

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