

Patient Guide



Brachytherapy:

The precise answer for tackling cancer



Because life is for living

The aim of this booklet is to help people who have been diagnosed with cancer – and their family and friends – at the time when they are deciding which type of treatment will be best for them.

This is inevitably an emotional and stressful time. It is important to have the advice and support of your healthcare team together with all the information you require. This can give you confidence that you are in control and making the best choices available to you.

To treat your cancer there are a number of options that your healthcare team may discuss with you, including:

- **Drug choices (chemotherapy)**
- **Surgery**
- **Radiotherapy including a treatment called brachytherapy**

This booklet provides you with information about brachytherapy, which is a type of radiotherapy. Brachytherapy is also known as internal radiotherapy or seed treatment.

The following pages explain:

- **What brachytherapy is**
- **How brachytherapy works**
- **The potential benefits of brachytherapy**
- **How to find out if brachytherapy is an option for you**
- **Where to find further information**

“When I was diagnosed with cancer, my specialist talked to me about the different types of treatment. This is how I found out about brachytherapy. He told me to go away and think about what I wanted to do. I was worried about making a choice, but I looked on the internet and discussed it more with my specialist. I then felt more in charge and positive about taking the treatment on, knowing that brachytherapy was a good option for me.”

What is brachytherapy and how does it work?

Radiotherapy is an important way to treat cancer. About 4 out of 10 people with cancer have some type of radiotherapy as part of their treatment. It works by destroying the cancer cells by targeting them with radiation, stopping them dividing and growing.

There are two basic types of radiotherapy:

- **External beam radiotherapy (EBRT)**
- **Brachytherapy – also sometimes known as internal radiotherapy**

Brachytherapy works by targeting the cancerous tumor from inside the body. The source of radiation is placed directly inside or next to the tumor. This approach reduces the risk of damage to healthy tissue and organs that are close to the tumor.

Brachytherapy is different from external beam radiotherapy, which delivers radiation from outside the body. This means that the radiation has to travel through healthy tissue to reach the tumor – so more healthy tissues and organs could be exposed.

In brachytherapy, the method of delivering the radiation directly to the tumor depends on a number of things, including where the cancer is located.

Brachytherapy can be either:

Permanent – tiny radioactive seeds, the size of a grain of rice, are placed into the tumor. The seeds give off low levels of radiation for a few months, killing the cancer cells. This is commonly used in prostate cancer

Temporary – the source of radiation is delivered to the tumor, and then removed after a few minutes

Brachytherapy has been shown to be highly effective in treating many types of cancer. Examples are prostate, breast, cervix and many more. Brachytherapy is particularly effective for small, localized tumors. It is a commonly used and proven method of treatment which has been in use for over a 100 years. In more recent years, new technology has continually improved the treatment to make it even more accurate and effective.

Doctors plan and deliver brachytherapy by using computer-based technology to decide how and where the radiation should be delivered. A special device then ensures that the radiation is delivered precisely and accurately to the target tumor.



What are the benefits of brachytherapy?

There are a number of potential benefits of brachytherapy compared to other options such as external beam radiotherapy or surgery.

The benefits of brachytherapy are:

- Very effective in treating cancer as radiation is delivered in a precise way
- Side effects are minimized due to the targeted nature of brachytherapy
- Minimally invasive technique
- Short treatment times (from 1 to 5 days)
- Short recovery times (typically 2 to 5 days) – people can usually return to everyday activities within a couple of days
- Less frequent visits to the hospital and overnight stays than with other options

Brachytherapy can be used to treat your cancer on its own or in combination with other treatment methods, like surgery or external beam radiotherapy, depending on what is needed for your treatment and is best for you.

These benefits of brachytherapy can get you back to your everyday life sooner with minimal disruption.

“I lead a busy life, and I travel a lot for my job. I had the chance to discuss the various options for treating my prostate cancer, and learn about the pros and cons of each. The recovery time from surgery really did not appeal to me. Radiotherapy seemed like a good option – my doctor told me about a few different approaches. Seed brachytherapy seemed like a good fit for me. After an initial consultation, I was admitted for one day to have the seed treatment, and was back to work the next week! Although a bit sore for the first day or two, I'm very pleased with my treatment, particularly because it hasn't impacted my day-to-day life.”



What else should I know about brachytherapy?

As for all cancer treatments, you may experience side effects after your treatment. Different people respond in different ways. The type of side effects varies on a number of things, such as the type of cancer being treated, what stage it is and what other health problems you may have.

Some patients may experience side effects soon after the treatment procedure. These can include bruising, swelling, discharge or discomfort in the area which has been treated. Or you may feel dizzy or tired. These can be treated with medication and will go away after a short time. Later side effects may occur in a small number of patients and are generally an effect of the radiation itself. Studies have shown that patients in general experience fewer side effects after brachytherapy than with other treatments.

Some people are concerned about possible effects of their treatment on their family. When temporary brachytherapy is used, no radioactive sources remain in the body after treatment. So, there is no radiation risk to friends or family. With seed implants, e.g. for prostate cancer, only the seeds are radioactive – not the patient. The radiation levels in the seeds are very low, and go away completely over time.

When discussing treatment options, it's always important to ask your doctor about what side effects may occur with the different available treatments.



Is brachytherapy right for me?

So, how do you know if brachytherapy is an option for you?

Ask – find as much information as you can about the options you have before deciding the best course of action. There are some suggestions at the end of this brochure on where further information can be found. Your healthcare team are the people who know specifically about your condition and whether you could benefit from brachytherapy treatment. Talk to them and discuss your options as you go through the decision making process. You could write a list of questions to ask your healthcare team – some examples are provided adjacent. You will also find these on the website www.aboutbrachytherapy.com including some general answers.

Finding all the right information will help ensure that together with family, friends and your healthcare team, you have explored all the different options available to you. This way, you can choose the course of treatment you believe is best to tackle your cancer.

Below are some questions you might want to include in your list:

- What are my treatment options?
- What impact will the different treatments have on my life (work, family, etc.)?
- How effective are the different options?
- Is brachytherapy an option for me?
- Will there be any side effects?
- In which cases does it work?
- Please describe exactly what happens, step-by-step.
- How long will the treatment last?
- Will I need to stay in hospital and, if so, for how long?
- Where can I be treated?
- How should I prepare for my treatment?
- What will my family need to know?





Further support and advice

About brachytherapy website

For further support and advice about brachytherapy and its role in the treatment of prostate cancer, you can visit www.aboutbrachytherapy.com

Local patient groups

You can also find more information about brachytherapy, other treatment options or someone to talk to about your feelings and concerns by getting in contact with a cancer patient group in your country.

The internet, library and your healthcare team are good places to start when looking for a patient group.

Other resources include:

American Cancer Society

<http://www.cancer.org>

National Cancer Institute

<http://www.cancer.gov>

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- Brachytherapy is a type of radiotherapy that places the radioactive source in, or at, the tumor site
- Brachytherapy is a precise treatment that targets the tumor and minimizes side effects
- Brachytherapy is as effective as traditional treatments such as radiotherapy or surgery
- Brachytherapy can be administered in a short treatment period allowing people to get back to their everyday life sooner

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