

Radiation Therapy for Skin Cancer: High Dose-Rate (HDR) Brachytherapy Treatment

You are having HDR brachytherapy to treat your skin cancer. This handout gives you information about your HDR brachytherapy treatment. You can find more information about radiation treatments in the Canadian Cancer Society booklet “Radiation Therapy: A Guide for People with Cancer”.

The number of skin brachytherapy treatments you have depends on what your radiation oncologist ordered for you. These treatment appointments will be booked over several weeks.

After each radiation treatment, it is safe for you to be around other people (including children) and pets. You are not radioactive.

We will support you and your family member/partner-in-care during your treatments. Let us know if you have any questions about your care or treatments.

About your HDR brachytherapy treatments

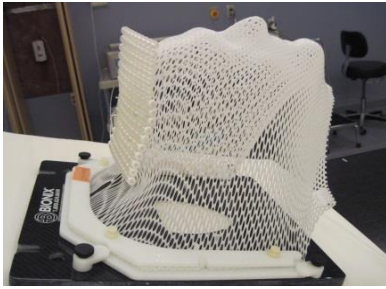
Your treatment appointments will be 30 to 40 minutes long. When you come for your appointments, check in at a computer on the B1 level (lower level) of the cancer centre. A radiation therapist will take you to the treatment room and tell you about the treatment. For this treatment, a radioactive source is put inside the applicator that is placed on your skin. The applicator will stay in place for 5 to 10 minutes.

During treatment, you will be lying down on a stretcher with the applicator placed onto your skin. You need to be in a comfortable position, as you can't move during your treatment.

We use two different kinds of applicators: a circle applicator (see picture #1) or a flap applicator (see picture #2). The circle applicator is put on your skin. The flap applicator looks like a rubber pad or flap. The flap applicator is attached to a mould you wear for the treatment. This mould will be made for you and looks different, depending on the area of your body treated.



Picture #1: Circle Applicator



Picture #2: Mould with flap applicator

The applicator is connected to the brachytherapy treatment machine (see picture #3) with one or more tubes. A radioactive source moves through the tube(s) into the applicator. At the end of each of your treatments, the radioactive source returns to the machine and the applicator is removed from your skin. You can go home after your treatment is done.



Picture #3: brachytherapy treatment machine.

Side effects you may have

Radiation treatment side effects are different for each person. Side effects depend on the part of your body treated, the type and amount of radiation you have and your general health.

The following information is about the side effects you may have.

No energy/feeling tired

Radiation therapy to your skin may cause you to feel tired. You may find your energy level is low.

What you can do to help:

- Keep your normal sleeping schedule. Wake up at the same time each day.
- A short nap (less than an hour) between 12pm and 3pm may give you more energy.
- Reduce your alcohol and caffeine in the afternoon and evening.
- Plan your day with time to rest before and after activities.
- Eat healthy foods. Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day.

- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250ml) of fluid every day. This will help you stay hydrated.
- Keep active with about 30 minutes of exercise (example: walking) each day. If 30 minutes is too hard, split it up into shorter 5 to 10 minute sessions.

For more information, read the “How to Manage Your Fatigue” booklet found at www.cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3991

Skin symptoms

Radiation therapy to your skin may cause you to have dry, itchy or reddening of the skin in the treatment area. These symptoms are common in areas where there is friction or skin folds. You may have loss of hair in the treatment area.

Caring for your skin in the treatment area

You can:

- Wash your skin gently. Use an unscented soap and lukewarm water. Pat dry.
- Use lanolin free unscented lotions or creams to moisturize your skin.
- Wear soft, loose fitting clothing over your skin in the treatment area.
- Use an electric razor and not a disposable shaver to shave your skin in the treatment area.

Do not:

- Do not go swimming if you have sores or open areas on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use aftershave or perfume on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use baby powder or cornstarch on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use aloe vera on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use a heating pad or ice pack on your skin in the treatment area. Do not sit in a hot tub.
- Do not use adhesive tape or band-aids on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not allow your skin surfaces to rub together or clothing to rub against your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not expose your skin in the treatment area to direct sun. Wear a wide brimmed hat and shirts that covers your skin in the treatment area. Stay in the shade if possible.
- Do not use sunscreen on your skin in the treatment area. After your treatment is finished and your skin has healed (no open areas) you may use sunscreen (SPF 30+).

It is important to let your healthcare team know if you have signs or symptoms of an infection (for example: a fever, drainage, or odour) of a sore or wound on your skin in the treatment area.

Relationships, body image and intimacy symptoms

Radiation therapy can affect your relationships, body image and intimacy. It may change the way you feel about sex. It is also common to have fears and worries that may affect your relationships with others. This can cause changes in your stress level and emotions.

What you can do to help:

- Talk to any member of your healthcare team about your fears and worries.
- Talk to your family and friends about your fears and worries.
- Ask any member of your healthcare team about community programs that can help support you

such as Hearth Place, Canadian Cancer Society, and the Look Good Feel Better Program.

- Keep a daily journal throughout your treatment.

For more information read the “Intimacy and Sex For People With Cancer and Their Partners” booklet found at www.cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf

After your treatment is finished

Any side effects you have from your radiation treatment will continue for 4 to 6 weeks after you are finished. Some of the side effects may get worse before they get better. At your last treatment appointment, the radiation therapists will talk to you about how to care for your skin during this time.

Your radiation oncologist will see you approximately 4 to 6 weeks after your last treatment. This appointment will be given to you before your last treatment. It is important you have enough of the medications the radiation oncologist prescribed for you until you come back for this appointment.

If you have a problem or concern about a symptom or side effect from your cancer treatment:

1. Call your primary nurse at the cancer centre from Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 4 pm, (except on holidays). Use the phone number your primary nurse gave you.
2. Contact CareChart Digital Health from Monday to Friday, 5 pm to 8:30 am and anytime on weekends and holidays for symptom management support.

Talk to a nurse using one of these options:

- Call the after-hours telephone line at 1-877-681-3057.
- Request a video call by going to www.carechart.ca.
- Use the CareChart Digital Health App. This App is available to download for iOS or Android devices.

Call 911 or go to the emergency department at the hospital closest to you for a medical emergency. Talk to any member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any of the information in this handout.

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