

What You Need to Know About Pelvic Radiation for Gynecological Cancers



The information in this pamphlet is for patients,
family members and caregivers.



MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL

CANCER CENTER

Cover art detail from Illuminations *Tulips*
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What is radiation?

Radiation treatment uses high energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells. Radiation does not cause pain or discomfort and does not make you radioactive. Pelvic radiation treatments are like having an x-ray between your hips.

Why pelvic radiation?

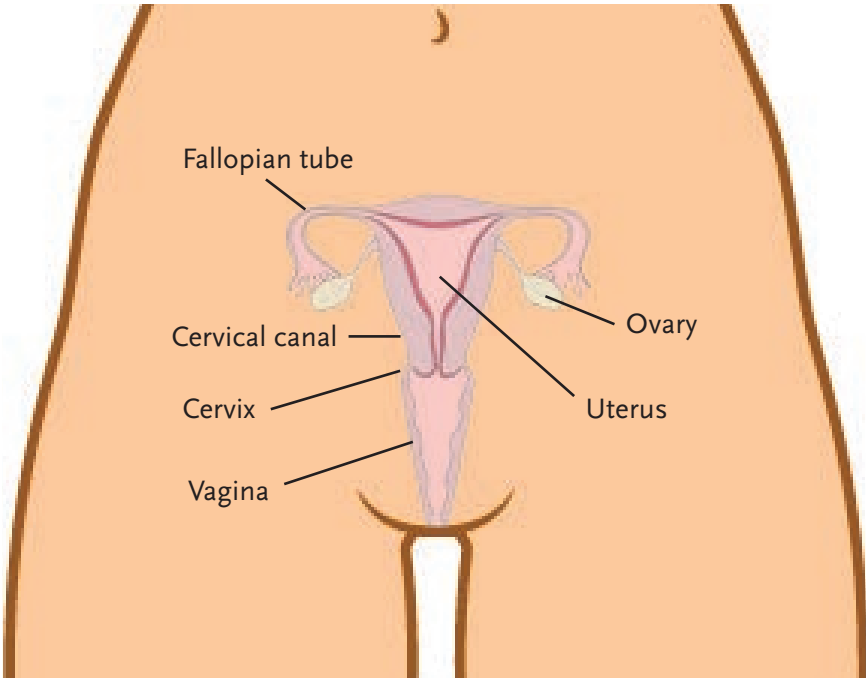
Gynecological cancers are best treated by surgery to remove the uterus, cervix, ovaries and fallopian tubes. Sometimes, a small number of cancer cells are left behind. It doesn't matter how skilled the surgeon may be, it is almost impossible to find every cancer cell. If cancer cells stay after surgery, they are likely to grow and cause the cancer to come back. Radiation can destroy the small number of cancer cells that may be left after surgery. Radiation is recommended when the risk of the cancer coming back is greater than the risk of side effects.

When do I start pelvic radiation?

Treatment is usually started 4-6 weeks after surgery.

What factors can increase the risk of my cancer coming back?

- How aggressive the cancer cells look under a microscope (grade of the tumor)
- Having cancer cells that have spread from the organ where they first grew



What might a radiation treatment schedule look like?

- Radiation is given on an outpatient basis.
- Treatments are Monday through Friday, five days a week.
- There is no treatment on weekends or holidays.
- There are usually 25 to 28 treatments.
- Weekly visits with your doctor and nurse will be done on a specific day to monitor you during treatment. Your team will let you know the location.

Call 911 in case of an emergency. If you have a question or concern about your treatment, a doctor is on call 24 hours a day. Please call: Radiation Oncology at (617) 726-8650.

What are possible short-term side effects of pelvic radiation?

These side effects tend to get better 4-6 weeks after your treatment is finished.

You might experience...	What can I do to help myself feel better?
<p>Bowel changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small bowel movements • Diarrhea • Cramps <p>Pain in the rectum or anus. If you have hemorrhoids, they can be irritated and can bleed.</p> <p>This may happen in the 2nd or 3rd week of treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow a low fiber, low fat diet also low in gas forming food. Schedule an appointment with a nutritionist to help you select these foods. Talk to the front desk staff to make your appointment. • Take medication over the counter anti-diarrheal medicine, such as Lomotil or Imodium.
<p>Urine changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peeing more often • Burning when peeing <p>This may happen in the 2nd or 3rd week of treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drink fluids throughout the day. • Avoid caffeine and alcohol that may irritate your bladder. • Pour water over the area (your genitals) while urinating. • Tell your doctor or nurse. They may order medication to help you.

<p>Vaginal discharge, itching, and dryness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take a sitz bath with cool water 3-4 times a day to soothe the area.• A vaginal moisturizing cream, such as Replens, may decrease the itching.
<p>Fatigue (feeling very tired)</p> <p>Feeling tired is common during radiation treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rest or nap during the day.• Go to bed a little earlier than usual.• Work shorter hours, if you are working.• Plan and pick activities that are necessary and important to you.• Ask family and friends to help with shopping, cleaning, and cooking.

What are possible long-term side effects of pelvic radiation?

Your treatment team will do everything possible to help you decrease long-term side effects.

You might experience...	What can I do to help myself feel better?
<p>Bowel changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going to the bathroom more often • Sensitivity to some foods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow a low fiber, low fat diet also low in gas forming food. Schedule an appointment with a nutritionist to help you select these foods. Talk to the front desk staff to make your appointment.
<p>Bladder changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going to the bathroom more often 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drink fluids throughout the day. • Avoid caffeine and alcohol that may irritate your bladder. • Pour water over the area (your genitals) while urinating. • Tell your doctor or nurse. They may order medication to help you.
<p>Vaginal dryness and tenderness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex may be painful or uncomfortable. <p>This may start during treatment or may not start until several months after treatment ends.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A vaginal moisturizer (Replens) may be used to help your vagina feel less dry. • A lubricant (Astroglide or KY Jelly) will help make sex more comfortable. • Ask your nurse about the Oncology Sexual Health Clinic at Mass General.

<p>Vaginal tightness and shrinking of vaginal tissue</p> <p>This may not start until several months after treatment ends.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to your treatment team about a vaginal dilator.
<p>Patients who have had a large number of pelvic lymph nodes removed during surgery may have swelling of the ankles and legs after pelvic radiation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to your treatment team for tips to decrease the swelling.

I am feeling nervous and depressed. Is this common?

The diagnosis of cancer causes many different emotions. Some people have said they felt like they were riding a roller coaster. You may feel nervous, depressed, anxious, worried, angry and alone. All of these emotions are normal for you to feel after you have been told you have a serious disease. Family relationships may be more stressed, but talking with family about your feelings and concerns may also help them understand and be able to give you the support you need.

We encourage you to speak with your doctor, nurse, and team social worker about any concerns you may have.

What Mass General support services are open to me?

The Mass General Oncology Sexual Health Clinic (Yawkey 9E) team can help to create a treatment plan that fits your needs and situation. Call 617-724-4800.

Social workers help patients and their families with many concerns from daily problems to life's most difficult situations. This is done through counseling, active problem solving, and using hospital and community resources. An **Oncology Resource Specialist** is available to give you information about:

- Community transportation options if you need assistance getting to your appointments
- Temporary lodging for patients who require local housing during their course of treatment

Social workers are members of your treatment team. They are available to you at anytime. All social work services are free of charge and no referral is necessary. Ask your treatment team for the name and phone number of your oncology team social worker.

The Katherine A. Gallagher Integrative Therapies Program offers wellness services and free workshops for patients with cancer and their loved ones. Through a wide range of services, you can learn tips for coping with symptoms and stress. These programs are designed to enhance quality of life and help manage a broad range of physical and emotional symptoms. A calendar listing the workshops and services are available throughout the Cancer Center and at massgeneral.org/cancer/supportservices.

Some of these services may be available in your treatment area. Please stop at the front desk to ask.

Notes



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