

Radiation Therapy for Gynecologic Cancers



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How does radiation therapy work?

Radiation therapy kills cancer cells by directing strong X-rays or other radiation at the site of the tumor. The radiation damages the cancer cells and stops them from growing and dividing. Radiation therapy is a local therapy, meaning that it affects the cancer cells only in the treated area.

When is radiation therapy used for gynecologic cancers?

The decision to use radiation therapy for gynecologic cancers will depend on the location and size of the tumor.

Your doctor may recommend radiation therapy to:

- Rid the pelvic area of potential cancer cells remaining after surgery
- Treat patients who cannot have surgery due to medical problems
- Shrink a tumor prior to surgery
- Ease pain, bleeding and other problems caused by cancer

What is the difference between external and internal radiation therapy?

External radiation comes from outside the body using a machine that directs radiation therapy to the cancer. Our program has the latest in external radiation technology, including intensity-modulated radiation therapy that can ensure that the tumor gets the appropriate amounts of radiation by taking into account the depth and shape of the tumor.

Internal radiation therapy is when radioactive material is placed inside the patient. The physician places it directly into or near the tumor. This type of radiation is also called brachytherapy.

When radiation is used as the primary form of therapy, it usually includes both external radiation and brachytherapy.

What happens during treatment? How long will treatment take?

The process of receiving external radiation therapy is quite easy when compared with many other medical procedures. It's not that different from receiving a standard X-ray, and the exposure only lasts a few minutes. In fact, most of your appointment time for radiation therapy will probably be spent getting you in the right position in order to receive the therapy.

The therapy is typically given five days a week for several weeks in a row. The doctor who will give you radiation therapy is known as a radiation oncologist. Our program treats patients with radiation therapy at Rhode Island Hospital. In fact, we are the only hospital-based radiation therapy program in the state.

What are the side effects of radiation therapy?

Radiation therapy affects normal cells as well as cancer cells. Side effects of radiation depend on what part of the body is treated and the type and amount of radiation therapy.

Side effects that you may have after radiation therapy include:

- Diarrhea
- Fatigue
- Skin changes
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Upset stomach
- Loose bowels
- Vaginal dryness and painful intercourse can be long-term side effects
- Pelvic radiation can damage the ovaries and cause premature menopause
- Bladder irritation and problems with urination
- Weakened pelvic (hip) bones and increased risk of fractures
- Low blood counts, causing anemia (low red blood cells) and leukopenia (low white blood cells)

Most of these side effects will get better or go away over time after you finish treatment. Ask your doctor which symptoms, if any, require immediate medical attention. For instance, you should call your doctor if there are signs of an infection, such as fever or pain.

How do I know if the treatment is working?

Because of the nature of cancer and radiation therapy, it is difficult to assess the effects of treatment immediately. However, after your sessions are complete, you will have follow-up exams and diagnostic tests, as needed, to evaluate your progress.

What should I do to take care of myself during treatment?

It is recommended that patients get rest and adopt a balanced diet, which will help repair healthy tissue and maintain your energy level. Staying hydrated is also critical. We recommend that patients drink at least eight glasses of liquid each day.

A nutritionist will be recommended for most patients, especially those who are losing a significant amount of weight during treatment. The Comprehensive Cancer Center's complementary therapy program offers a variety of services during treatment, including Reiki, massage and acupuncture.

What do I need to know about treatment's impact on fertility?

Effective options are available to women concerned about preserving their fertility as they are undergoing cancer treatment. What steps can be taken depend on the type of cancer and the extent of cancer. In the case of radiation therapy, gynecologic oncologists will often recommend moving a woman's ovaries out of the pelvis and up into the abdomen in order to help protect the ovaries during treatment.

The Comprehensive Cancer Center's Radiation Oncology Services at Rhode Island Hospital includes pioneering physicians, unique and sophisticated technology, and experienced staff. Ours is the only hospital-based radiation oncology program in the state.

Using an array of advanced technologies, the department of radiation oncology has a proven record of superior outcomes for patients who have been diagnosed with common and uncommon cancers of every anatomical site.

Our multidisciplinary team works together to provide integrated, streamlined care for every patient.

Team members include:

- Physicians
- Medical physicists
- Dosimetrists
- Radiation therapists
- Nurses
- Nutritionists
- Social workers

Our program works within the Comprehensive Cancer Center's multidisciplinary services to meet all of our patients' needs. We encourage patients to use free services such as patient navigation, clinical social work and complementary therapies.

As a critical member of your treatment team, it is important that you are informed and feel comfortable with your care plan. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. You can reach us at 401-444-8311.

