

Radiotherapy

What Is Radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is a common treatment for gynaecological cancers, including cancers of the cervix, uterus (womb), ovaries, vulva, and vagina. It uses high-energy radiation to target and destroy cancer cells while minimising damage to healthy tissues. Radiotherapy may be used as a standalone treatment or in combination with surgery or chemotherapy, depending on the type and stage of cancer. This guide provides an overview of how radiotherapy works, the types of radiotherapy used for gynaecological conditions, what to expect during treatment, and how to manage potential side effects.

Why Is Radiotherapy Used For Gynaecological Cancers?

Radiotherapy is an effective treatment for gynaecological cancers because it directly targets cancer cells, preventing them from growing and multiplying. The treatment can be used in various ways depending on the specific cancer and its progression:

- **Primary treatment:** Radiotherapy may be used as the main treatment for cancers such as cervical or uterine cancer, especially when surgery is not possible or advisable.
- **Adjuvant therapy:** Radiotherapy can be administered after surgery to eliminate any remaining cancer cells and reduce the risk of recurrence.
- **Neoadjuvant therapy:** In some cases, radiotherapy may be used before surgery to shrink tumours, making them easier to remove.
- **Palliative care:** For advanced gynaecological cancers, radiotherapy can help relieve symptoms such as pain, bleeding, or pressure on surrounding organs, improving quality of life.

Types Of Radiotherapy For Gynaecological Cancers

There are two main types of radiotherapy used to treat gynaecological cancers:

- **External beam radiotherapy (EBRT):** This is the most common type of radiotherapy, where high-energy X-rays are directed at the cancer from outside the body. The treatment is delivered over several sessions, with each session typically lasting 15 to 30 minutes. EBRT is usually performed on an outpatient basis, meaning patients can go home after each session.
- **Internal radiotherapy (brachytherapy):** Brachytherapy involves placing a radiation source directly inside the body, close to the cancer. This allows for a high dose of radiation to be delivered to the tumour while limiting exposure to surrounding healthy tissue. Brachytherapy is often used for cervical or uterine cancers and may be used in combination with EBRT.

What To Expect During Radiotherapy Treatment

If you are undergoing radiotherapy for a gynaecological condition, your treatment plan will be tailored to your specific diagnosis. Here's what you can expect:

- **Planning your treatment:** Before starting radiotherapy, you will have a planning session, which may involve a CT scan to map out the exact location of the cancer. This allows the radiotherapy team to accurately target the tumour and minimise radiation exposure to healthy tissues.
- **During the treatment:** External beam radiotherapy is painless and does not require anaesthesia. You will lie on a treatment table while the machine delivers radiation to the targeted area. The treatment only takes a few minutes, although the setup process may take a little longer. You will not feel the radiation, and you can go home after the session.
- **Internal radiotherapy (brachytherapy):** This procedure may require a short hospital stay, depending on the type and duration of treatment. A small applicator is inserted into the vagina or uterus to deliver radiation directly to the tumour. Once the treatment is complete, the applicator is removed.

Managing Side Effects Of Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy can cause side effects as it affects both cancerous and healthy tissues. Common side effects may include:

- **Fatigue:** Many patients feel tired during radiotherapy, particularly towards the end of the treatment course. Rest and pacing yourself can help manage this.
- **Skin irritation:** The skin in the treatment area may become red, sore, or dry. Moisturising creams recommended by your care team can help soothe the skin.
- **Bladder and bowel issues:** Radiotherapy can cause inflammation in the bladder and bowel, leading to symptoms such as frequent urination, diarrhoea, or discomfort. It's important to stay hydrated and follow dietary recommendations from your healthcare provider.
- **Vaginal irritation:** Internal radiotherapy can cause vaginal soreness or discharge. Your doctor may suggest using vaginal dilators to maintain vaginal elasticity after treatment.

Most side effects gradually improve after treatment is completed, though it is essential to discuss any concerns with your care team so they can provide appropriate support.

Why Choose Birmingham Gynaecology Clinic

At Birmingham Gynaecology Clinic, we provide expert, compassionate care to women undergoing radiotherapy for gynaecological cancers. Our experienced team works closely with you to develop personalised treatment plans, ensuring that radiotherapy is delivered in the most effective and comfortable way possible. With state-of-the-art facilities and access to the latest technologies, we are committed to achieving the best outcomes for our patients while prioritising their comfort and wellbeing.

Contact us

If you have been diagnosed with a gynaecological condition and are considering radiotherapy as a treatment option, contact Birmingham Gynaecology Clinic to book a consultation. Our team is here to provide expert guidance and comprehensive care throughout your treatment journey.