

## Radiation Medicine Department

# Cancer of the Uterus: Treatment

### Treatment

Treatment generally begins within a few weeks after the diagnosis. There will be time for the woman to talk with the doctor about her treatment choices, get a second opinion, and learn more about uterine cancer.

The choice of treatment depends on the size of the tumor, the stage of the disease, whether female hormones affect tumor growth, and the tumor grade. (The grade tells how closely the cancer cells resemble normal cells and suggests how fast the cancer is likely to grow. Low-grade cancers are likely to grow and spread more slowly than high-grade cancers.) Your doctor will also consider other factors, including your age and general health.

Women with uterine cancer have many treatment options. Most women with uterine cancer are treated with surgery. Some have radiation therapy. A smaller number of women may be treated with hormonal therapy. Some receive a combination of therapies.

Your doctor is the best person to describe your treatment choices and discuss the expected results of treatment.

### Surgery

Most women with uterine cancer have surgery to remove the uterus (hysterectomy) through an incision in the abdomen. The doctor also removes both fallopian tubes and both ovaries. (This procedure is called a bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy.) Your doctor may also remove the lymph nodes near the tumor to see if they contain cancer. If cancer cells have reached the lymph nodes, it may mean that the disease has spread to other parts of the body.

### Hormonal Therapy

Hormonal therapy involves substances that prevent cancer cells from getting or using the hormones they may need to grow. It is called a systemic therapy because it can affect cancer cells throughout the body. Usually, hormonal therapy is a type of progesterone taken as a pill.

Doctors may use hormonal therapy for women with uterine cancer who are unable to have surgery or radiation therapy. Also, the doctor may give hormonal therapy to women with metastasized or recurrent uterine cancer.

## Radiation Therapy

High-energy rays are used to kill cancer cells. Like surgery, radiation therapy is a local therapy. It affects cancer cells only in the treated area.

Some women with Stage I, II, or III uterine cancer need both radiation therapy and surgery. They may have radiation before surgery to shrink the tumor or after surgery to destroy any cancer cells that remain in the area. Also, the doctor may suggest radiation treatments for the small number of women who cannot have surgery.

Doctors use two types of radiation therapy to treat uterine cancer:

- **External radiation:** In external radiation therapy, a large machine outside the body is used to aim radiation at the tumor area. This is usually done on an outpatient basis, and you will receive external radiation 5 days a week for several weeks. This schedule helps protect healthy cells and tissue by spreading out the total dose of radiation. No radioactive materials are put into the body.
- **Internal Radiation:** In internal radiation therapy, tiny tubes containing a radioactive substance are inserted through the vagina and left in place for a few days. You will stay in the hospital during this treatment. To protect others from radiation exposure, you may not be able to have visitors or may have visitors only for a short period of time while the implant is in place. Once the implant is removed, you will have no radioactivity in her body.

Some women may need both external and internal radiation therapies.

Here are some questions you may want to ask your doctor about radiation therapy:

- What is the goal of this treatment?
- How will the radiation be given?
- Will I need to stay in the hospital? For how long?
- When will the treatments begin? When will they end?
- How will I feel during therapy? Are there side effects?
- What can I do to take care of myself during therapy?
- How will we know if the radiation therapy is working?
- Will I be able to continue my normal activities during treatment? How will radiation therapy affect my sex life?
- Will follow-up visits be necessary?

You do not need to ask all your questions at one time. You will have other chances to ask the doctor to explain things and to get more information.

Side Effects

The side effects of cancer treatment depend on the type of treatment and may be different for each person. Side effects are often only temporary.

Doctors and nurses can explain the possible side effects of treatment, and they can suggest ways to help relieve symptoms that may occur during and after treatment.

Side Effects of Radiation Therapy

Because cancer treatment may damage healthy cells and tissues, unwanted side effects sometimes occur. These side effects depend on many factors, including the type and extent of the treatment. Side effects may not be the same for each person, and they may even change from one treatment session to the next. Before treatment starts, your doctors and nurses will explain the possible side effects and how they will help you manage them.

The side effects of radiation therapy depend mainly on the treatment dose and the part of the body that is treated. Common side effects of radiation include:

- Dry, reddened skin and hair loss in the treated area
- Loss of appetite
- Extreme tiredness
- Dryness, itching, tightening, and burning in the vagina
- Diarrhea
- Frequent and uncomfortable urination
- Weakened immune system (Radiation therapy may reduce the number of white blood cells, which help protect the body against infection.)

Your doctor may advise you not to have intercourse during radiation therapy. However, most women can resume sexual activity within a few weeks after treatment ends. Your doctor or nurse can suggest ways to relieve any vaginal discomfort related to treatment.

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