



Taking aim at breast cancer

New radiation therapy offers faster and more precise treatment

Recent advances in radiation therapy have made it possible for some breast cancer patients at Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital to opt for much faster radiation treatment with outcomes as successful as traditional therapy. Breast brachytherapy—a very precise form of cancer radiation—takes place in just five days, rather than the typical seven weeks for regular radiation therapy.

“We’ve learned that in most cases when breast cancer recurs, it’s near the original tumor,” says Barry Rosen, M.D., a breast cancer surgeon at Good Shepherd Hospital. That means there could be no need to treat the entire breast—just the area where the tumor was, he explains.

How it works

In preparation for brachytherapy, balloon catheters (tiny tubes) are inserted into the breast during lumpectomy surgery when the initial tumor is removed or they can be inserted afterward using local anesthesia. Radiation is then delivered

through the catheters using a high-dose radiation unit. The radiation is applied directly to the area of the tumor, while sparing the good tissue and surrounding vital organs.

Traditional radiation therapy takes place from the outside in, while this new method delivers radiation from the inside out, explains Dr. Rosen. “A much higher dose can be given because it’s more direct,” he says. Patients are given two doses daily, for five days, each lasting 10 to 15 minutes.

Who’s eligible?

Unfortunately, brachytherapy is not for everyone. Only women ages 50 and older are eligible, says James Ruffer, M.D., medical director of Good Shepherd Hospital’s radiation oncology program. Since there’s no long-term data available for women who’ve been treated with brachytherapy, a woman younger than 50 has more years in which a tumor could recur. Currently, eight years of data are available, compared to more than 20 years for traditional radiation.

“We suggest brachytherapy to patients who are appropriate, based on evidence-based medicine,” says Dr. Ruffer. This includes patients who have early-stage breast cancer. In the future, Dr. Ruffer expects that more and more women will be treated with brachytherapy, until it’s used more often than traditional radiation therapy.

The treatment’s only disadvantage is the tube, which must remain in the woman’s body for five days, but Dr. Rosen says it’s not much more than a nuisance.

Brachytherapy has also been used successfully in treating several other types of cancer, including prostate, endometrial, uterine, cervical, lung, colon and skin cancers.

Need someone to lean on?

To speak to our breast health specialist, call Mary Sue Fidale, R.N., M.A., LCPC, at **847-381-9600, ext. 26-5886**.