

# PUVA treatment

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## Introduction

This booklet gives information about PUVA treatment. Please ask staff if you have any questions.

Ultraviolet (UV) light is widely used by dermatologists for skin conditions. The choice of UV over other forms of treatment depends on things such as a patient's age, disease, skin type, previous treatments and current medication. The doctor will discuss with you why he / she feels UV is best for you. UV is not a long-term cure, but it can improve your condition significantly for a period of time.

## What is PUVA treatment?

"PUVA" stands for the use of a psoralen drug (P) in combination with Ultraviolet A (UVA) light. The purpose of the psoralen is to make the skin more sensitive to the ultraviolet light. The ultraviolet light is emitted by special lamps which are only available at certain medical centres. PUVA therapy can only be carried out in a hospital under medical supervision.

## How is psoralen given?

There are three methods: oral (by mouth), topical (directly on the affected skin) and bath.

## **1. Oral**

The psoralen tablet is usually taken two hours before exposure to the UVA light. The dose depends on your height and weight. The tablets should not be taken on an empty stomach but with food eg. a light meal or banana.

It is important to protect your eyes when having oral psoralen because tablets sensitise your skin and eyes to sunlight for up to 24 hours depending on your skin condition. To prevent the risk of cataracts, you must wear sunglasses - the nurses will advise you for how long.

Sunglasses from Boots labelled "UVA/UVB 100% protected" are suitable. We can test your current sunglasses for you; and may also be able to loan you a pair. If you would prefer to wear your ordinary glasses, staff can advise on suitable coatings for the lenses.

You need protection from sunlight through window glass, bare fluorescent tubes and halogen lamps. Protection is not needed from ordinary light bulbs; light from television and computer screens; lights with plastic diffusion covers; or at night-time.

## **2. Topical**

This is used to treat small areas of skin. It may be applied as a solution, gel or paint. The doctor will decide which type is most appropriate for you. Whichever is chosen, it will be applied in the phototherapy unit with the help of the nurse.

Paint / gel must be applied evenly and accurately for each treatment session. Following application, you have to wait 15 minutes before having UVA therapy to allow the psoralen to be absorbed.

## **3. Bath**

This involves soaking in a bath of psoralen solution for 15 minutes before your UVA treatment. The solution is showered off after treatment with a soap substitute eg. aqueous cream.

Tips: Spread the psoralen around the water to ensure it is well mixed \* Immerse your whole body to ensure maximum coverage \* Avoid splashing the face or eyes with the solution \* Gently agitate the water when soaking \* Gently pat the skin dry before UVA treatment.

For a basin PUVA, hands and/or feet are soaked for 15 minutes before UVA therapy.

### *General tips*

The skin remains sensitive to light for 24 hours, so avoid further UV exposure during this period, (either sunbeds or natural. Eye protection following topical or bath treatment is not necessary.

### **What is involved in UVA light therapy?**

The UVA part of your treatment usually takes place in a specially designed stand-up-cabinet, which is lined with UVA-emitting fluorescent lamps. Patients with skin disease just affecting the hands and feet receive light to those sites only via a smaller portable unit.

Following assessment in the phototherapy clinic, we will show you the machine, and discuss the days and times of your treatment with you.

Treatment is usually twice a week for approximately 6-10 weeks.

### **Test dose**

If you are having full body treatment, and depending on your skin type, we may do a test of light on your back to work out your starting dose. 72 hours later the phototherapy nurse will read the results, and treatment will start.

### **Procedure on the day**

Before you get in the machine we will ask you to undress and change into a gown. The nurse will assess your skin before each treatment. You get in the cabinet for treatment, the nurse explains how you should stand and you will remove your gown. Initially, treatment takes only a few minutes (or even seconds), gradually increasing to a maximum of around twenty five minutes. The dose increase on each visit depends on your skin type, skin disorder and the response to the previous treatment.

After treatment it is not unusual to develop mild skin redness. Please tell the nurse at your next appointment if, a few hours after treatment, you felt hot, uncomfortable or your skin remained red.

You may wear protective eye goggles and a face visor while inside the cabinet - the nurse will advise you. If your skin condition is affecting the eyelids, we may expose this area after discussion with the phototherapy nurse. If goggles are not worn, eyelids must be kept firmly shut. Face visors are used if your face does not require treatment. Again, the nurse will advise you.

## Short-term side effects

We make every effort to avoid problems but occasionally side effects can occur, such as:

**Redness** The main risk of PUVA therapy in the short term is sunburn-like reactions, particularly for people with fair skin. We try to avoid this by increasing the light therapy very slowly.

We aim to produce a mild redness after every treatment. However, if your skin becomes uncomfortable or hot please report it to the nurse on the phototherapy number below. If it is extremely uncomfortable or blistered please report it immediately. Out-of-hours, please contact the hospital switchboard on 020 7794 0500 and ask to speak to the on-call dermatologist. You will need to explain to the doctor that you have had UVA treatment and describe your symptoms. If this is problematic, go to the accident and emergency department, taking this leaflet with you – they will contact the on-call dermatologist for you. We sometimes suspend treatment and creams until symptoms settle.

**Dry skin** Skin can become dry during treatment and for some time afterwards. Applying an emollient to the whole skin at least twice a day will help keep the skin hydrated / supple.

**Itching** UV therapy can cause itching, particularly during the first two weeks of therapy. Emollients and antihistamine may be required to treat this.

**Cold sores** (Herpes Simplex virus) Those who have had cold sores in the past may get a repeat infection. Apply lip sunscreen to the lips before every treatment to prevent this.

**Folliculitis** Small pustules and minor inflammation around the hair follicle can occur. This does not cause discomfort, and treatment can proceed. Applying moisturiser in a downward motion before treatment may help to prevent this.

**Photosensitivity** If you usually develop a rash with sunlight (e.g. prickly heat), you may suffer a flare-up with UV treatment. If this occurs, tell the phototherapy nurse and we may suggest treatment to ease the symptoms.

**Nausea** Should this occur and if intolerable, please tell the nurse as we may be able to change your tablets. Taking your tablets with a banana or light meal may help.

**Please ask staff if you have any concerns about these side effects.**

## Long-term side effects

**Photoageing** Frequent exposure to UV may cause ageing changes in the skin, such as freckles & wrinkles.

**Skin cancer** If you have a lot of treatments (more than 200) you will have an increased risk of skin cancer. Your treatment and follow up examinations will take this into account. If you notice any early signs (for example the beginning of a small lump) tell the dermatology staff. These are not serious if detected early.

**PUVA freckles** Patients who have had a lot of PUVA may develop dark freckles which may be permanent.

**Actinic keratoses** These are small patches of scaly skin, which may be pre-cancerous, but are easily treatable.

Please remember there is a limit to the amount of UV therapy you can have in your lifetime. We keep records to avoid exceeding the recommended amount. Lower limits may be applied for those who have bath PUVA or who have other skin cancer risk factors.

Please ask the nurse or doctor if you want more information.

If you experience any complications outside office hours, please contact the on-call dermatologist via the main switchboard on 020 7794 0500 or go to casualty, taking this leaflet with you and ask them to contact the on-call dermatologist.

## What you need to do during treatment

- On PUVA days, before treatment, please apply a moisturiser e.g. Diprobase cream, aqueous cream, Cetraben etc. Avoid tar, steroid and vitamin preparations. After treatment and on non-treatment days, the regular and liberal use of any moisturiser is recommended, as well as your topical treatments.
- You should tell the nurse in advance when you are running out of treatments, so that a prescription can be ready for you at your next visit. It is your responsibility to collect your prescriptions from the phototherapy and pharmacy departments. Ask staff for directions.
- Always inform the nurse if you are taking, or about to start, new medication or creams while having treatment, as some treatments can make you more sensitive to UV light.
- Perfumes can make you more sensitive to sunlight so avoid using scented products such as

bath foam, deodorant, perfumes and after-shave lotions before treatment on PUVA days. You can apply these after treatment or direct to clothing on treatment days.

- Over the period of treatment do not use a sunbed or sunbathe. On brighter days, protect exposed areas of skin from sunlight by wearing a hat, long sleeves, sunblock etc.
- Avoid haircuts or hairstyle changes midway through treatment, as newly exposed areas are likely to burn.
- If you wear jewellery (eg. rings) at the first treatment, wear them at every treatment thereafter; otherwise you may burn at newly exposed sites.
- If you wear any clothes in the cabinet it is important to wear the same ones each time to cover up the same parts of your body for even exposure purposes.
- Women: PUVA is not recommended during pregnancy. You should avoid getting pregnant during a course of PUVA. If you do fall pregnant please tell the medical staff.

- Men need to cover their genitals with dark underwear, sock or a jock strap for every treatment. Protective clothing is essential - please do not forget!
- Avoid alcohol before treatment (on the day).
- Please call the nurse if you experience any discomfort in the machine.
- Some plants, vegetables and fruits (eg. celery, parsnips, figs or limes), have photosensitisers in them. These make you more sensitive to UV light, so please avoid handling them for at least two hours before treatment.
- Regular and punctual clinic attendance is important. To avoid inconveniencing other patients, please be on time for your appointment - we may be unable to see late arrivals.
- If you miss three appointments without notification the treatment will be withdrawn to allow treatments for other patients. If you are unable to attend for treatment you should telephone the phototherapy unit 020 7830 2946 to let the staff know.

**PUVA therapy can only be given if you can commit to attending all the treatment sessions within the prescribed course. If you cannot attend, PUVA therapy may not be the best treatment for you. If you want further information, please ask the nurse or ring 020 7830 2946 during office hours (except NOT between 1230-1400hrs). If there is no reply please leave a message on the answerphone.**

Notes