

# Phototesting

The aim of this information sheet is to help answer some of the questions you may have about phototesting. It explains the benefits and risks of phototesting, as well as any alternatives and what you can expect when you come to hospital. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

## Why should I have phototesting?

There are a number of skin conditions that can be triggered or made worse by sunlight. They are usually caused by the invisible ultraviolet (UV) part of sunlight, and more rarely by visible light.

We use phototesting to find out which part of sunlight is causing your skin problem, and how sensitive you are to sunlight. This helps your dermatologist diagnose and treat your skin condition.

## What is phototesting?

Phototesting is carried out using two machines – a **monochromator** and a **solar simulator**. We use them to test small areas of your skin with ultraviolet and visible light. Phototesting is not painful and should be an entirely comfortable experience.

- The **monochromator** is used to separate sunlight into different types and colours (wavelengths) of light. We mainly use ultraviolet because it is the part of sunlight that most commonly causes skin problems. Small areas on your back will be tested with different wavelengths and doses of light. Each place tested is roughly the same size as the end of a pencil (5mm in diameter). The test takes approximately one hour and you can sit and read while it is done.
- A **solar simulator** produces light that is just like sunlight, and we use this to try and provoke your skin rash. Five small areas on either your upper arm or tummy are exposed to the light from this machine. Each area is about the size of a 50p coin. The test takes approximately 10 minutes with you lying on a couch.

## What happens during phototesting?

On arrival you will be shown to a private cubicle where you will be asked to remove your shirt or top and wear a gown with an opening at the back. You will then have the phototesting. The places that will be tested on your skin will be outlined with a marker pen and exposed to the light. This is not harmful because the doses are low and only involve very small areas of the skin. **It is important that the pen marks are not removed until all the readings have been seen the following day.**

The testing takes about one and a half hours. You will need to come back the next day so that your phototest results can be interpreted. The consultant dermatologist will discuss what the test results mean, and advise you on the relevant treatment. During this visit you will be asked to wear a gown so that the results of phototesting can be seen on your skin and so that you can have a general skin examination.

## What are the risks?

- If you are sensitive to sunlight, you will usually develop the same skin reaction that you have to sunlight on the small sites we use for phototesting. If you experience a strong response to the tests, the consultant will prescribe a steroid cream, which you should apply to the skin as directed, to reduce the reaction.
- The doses of ultraviolet and visible light we use for testing are roughly the same as those experienced within 20 minutes of exposure to UK summer sunshine. In healthy skin, it is normal for the longest exposure to turn the skin slightly pink or produce a tan. The reactions normally fade over a few weeks.

## Are there any alternatives?

Some skin conditions that are caused by sunlight can be diagnosed using blood tests. You will be asked to have blood tests to exclude these conditions. Even if the blood tests are positive it is still advisable to have phototesting, as this will tell us how sensitive you are to the sun and which wavelengths of sunlight cause your skin condition. This information will help us make a diagnosis and develop a treatment plan for you.

## What happens after the tests are complete?

A letter summarising all the test results, the diagnosis and the treatment plan will go to your referring consultant and also to your general practitioner (GP). You will also receive a copy of the same letter.

## Will I have a follow-up appointment?

If your phototests are positive, you will be offered a follow-up appointment in our Tuesday afternoon clinic at Guy's Hospital. This is usually arranged once or twice a year to monitor your skin condition and update your treatment plan. Between these visits you will be cared for by your referring doctor at your local hospital or clinic.

## What should I bring with me?

- A list of all of the medicines you are currently taking. This should include any skin treatments (creams or ointments) that you have been using, as well as any oral medicines (medicines taken by mouth), sprays or inhalers. Your family doctor will be able to give you this information if you are unsure.
- Any over-the-counter medicines you have bought yourself and any alternative medicines that you are taking, such as herbal or homeopathic remedies.
- Any photographs you may have taken of your skin rash.
- Your diary, as we may need to arrange dates with you for follow-up appointments and further treatments.
- If possible, wear dark coloured clothing for the tests as the marker pen may stain pale fabrics.
- Children must be accompanied by a parent/guardian.
- Adults may be accompanied by a friend or adult family member.

## Dos and don'ts

- **Do** attend on both appointment days.
- **Do** contact the phototesting practitioners if you have any problems.
- **Do** stop applying moisturisers or steroid creams (such as Betnovate® or Dermovate®) to your back, tummy and upper arms three days before the tests start.

- **Do** stop taking antihistamines 48 hours before the phototests tests start, as they will affect your skin's reactions to the testing. We will advise you when you can start taking them again after the testing is complete.
- **Do** call us for advice if you are taking immunosuppressant medicines (medicines that suppress your immune system), as these will affect your phototest results. For example, oral steroids (steroids taken by mouth, such as prednisolone, ciclosporin, or azathioprine).
- **Do not** wash off the marks on your back and arm until all readings are complete.
- **Do not** apply creams or ointments or take any new medication during the two days of tests – it is important that we see how your sun rash develops.

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your phototesting appointment, please contact the photosensitivity practitioners, **Susan Walker** or **Harsha Naik** on **020 7188 8141** (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm). Out of hours, please leave a message and they will contact you the next working day.

## Further information

### Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

**t:** 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas'      **t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's      **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

### Language support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

**t:** 020 7188 8815      **fax:** 020 7188 5953

### NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### NHS Direct

Offers health information and advice from specially trained nurses over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 0845 4647      **w:** [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

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Membership is free and it is completely up to you how much you get involved. To become a member of our Foundation Trust, you need to be 18 years of age or over, live in Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham, Wandsworth or Westminster or have been a patient at either hospital in the last five years. To join:

**t:** 0848 143 4017      **e:** [members@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk)      **w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk)

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