Oral PUVA phototherapy

Your doctor has referred you to the Dowling Phototherapy Unit for a course of oral PUVA phototherapy to treat your skin condition. This leaflet explains about this treatment in detail, including its benefits, risks and alternatives. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is phototherapy?
Natural sunlight has been known to be beneficial in certain skin disorders for thousands of years. The ultraviolet part of the radiation produced by the sun (UVR) is used in phototherapy. Although it can’t be seen, it is an important part of sunlight and is divided into ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) wavelengths. UVA rays go deeper into the skin than other types of UVR and can cause the skin to tan. UVB rays do not penetrate as deeply but can cause the skin to burn. In phototherapy we use carefully calculated doses of UVB to minimise this risk.

What is PUVA?
PUVA therapy is a treatment in which a medication called psoralen (P) is taken by mouth two to three hours before exposure of the skin to UVA wavelengths of light. The number of tablets you will take depends on your height and weight, and you will be given this medication from the hospital pharmacy. The psoralen reacts in the skin with the UVA to cause effects that help improve or clear a variety of skin conditions. The tablets also make you more sensitive to UVA in sunlight (the rays that get through cloud and window glass) on the days of your treatment.

Are there any other types of phototherapy?
The other phototherapy treatments are narrowband UVB (NB-UVB, in which a small part of the UVB light spectrum is used to treat the skin condition), topical PUVA (where psoralen is applied directly to the skin) and UVA1. The choice of phototherapy treatment depends upon your skin condition.

Why am I having this treatment?
This is the most suitable treatment for your skin condition. It is often recommended if you have tried ointments and creams without success but before trying other tablet medication. Oral PUVA therapy has been found to be a particularly useful treatment for many skin conditions including psoriasis, plaque stage mycosis fungoides, and hand and foot eczema. It is occasionally used in other conditions if UVB treatment has failed, for example eczema or vitiligo, as PUVA is a more potent form of treatment than UVB.

Important points to remember before and during your treatment

- You need to commit to attending the Phototherapy Department twice a week. Attending regularly helps to achieve better results from your treatment.
- Reduce your exposure to the sun to minimise the risk of sunburn. On the days you have taken tablets, cover up with long-sleeved clothes, particularly on sunny days. You may also need to wear a hat. Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 50 and a UVA seal of protection, and reapply it regularly. Please do not sunbathe or use a sunbed during the whole course of your treatment.
Let us know if you have a haircut or if, for any other reason, any areas of skin become newly exposed during the course of treatment. If you wear clothing during your treatment, it is important that you wear the same clothing or the exact same style for every treatment of your course.

Before you start PUVA treatment, the doctor and nurse will check the medicines that you are taking. If any medications you are taking (including anything bought over the counter) change during your PUVA treatment, please let the nursing staff know before they start your next treatment. This is because some tablets can affect the way your skin reacts to UVA.

Male genital protection must be worn when in the machine.

On the day of your treatment

- Do not wear perfumes, deodorants, aftershave lotions or other cosmetic products before your treatment. Some of these contain substances which make your skin more sensitive to light. This can cause patchy discolouration of the skin and take some months to fade. You can use them after each treatment.
- Please let us know if you have started any new medications or creams as some can make your skin more sensitive to light.
- On treatment days, please do not apply any creams or ointments to your skin before you go in the machine apart from an appropriate moisturiser. We suggest that you moisturise with a water-based moisturiser beforehand as this helps your skin to absorb the ultraviolet light. Please ask your nursing team for more information on this.
- Do not use oily creams as these could cause burning or prevent the UVA from being absorbed.

Special requirements for PUVA treatments

Psoralen tablets make both the skin and the eyes sensitive to light for up to 24 hours after taking them. You must wear protective glasses both indoors and outdoors for 24 hours after you take your tablets (but not at night) to avoid increasing the risk of cataracts (clouding of the lens of the eye). The nurses will advise you on suitable eyewear and will test your glasses to check that they offer 100% UV protection. You must also wear the protective goggles and face shield provided during treatment unless the doctor tells you not to. You need to take extra care throughout the course of PUVA treatment to protect your skin from light. UVA light can penetrate through glass and cloud, so care needs to be taken both indoors and outdoors during daylight hours.

What can I expect on my first treatment?

On your first visit to the unit you will have a pre-treatment nursing assessment. A member of the phototherapy nursing staff will also show you round the unit and will explain the treatment and all the procedures to you. Before you begin the light treatment, you will usually need to attend for a series of small test doses, called MPD (minimal phototoxic dose) testing. A number of doses of UVA will be shone on small squares on your back, two hours after you have taken a standard dose of psoralen. The testing takes around 30 minutes and the result will be read four days later. Your result will help us to decide on your starting dose in the machine so that enough psoralen is delivered to your skin. **Your first treatment in the UVA machine will only happen on your second visit.**
What happens during treatment?
You should take the prescribed number of tablets two or three hours (depending on the type of psoralen prescribed) before attending for your treatment/test dose. They should not be taken on an empty stomach but with a light meal or snack. However, do not take them with a full meal as this can prevent them from being effective.

You should avoid alcohol before your treatment.

The nurse will call you from the waiting room when the machine is available for your treatment. They will examine your skin on each visit and ask you some questions before you enter the machine. We will give you goggles to protect your eyes, which you must wear at all times during your treatment. Men will also be given genital protection. We will show you how to stand in the correct position in the machine to make sure that all your skin is exposed evenly.

Initially you will be in the UVA machine a few minutes, but you can eventually stay in it for as long as an hour. We closely monitor the amount of UVA you receive and we will increase the dose with each treatment as long as you have tolerated the previous treatment. The machine is quite bright and you may feel warm if you need to stay in the booth for a long time. Please let the nursing staff know if you feel uncomfortable or unwell.

How long do treatments last?
This depends on your skin condition and varies from person to person. We generally give treatments twice a week (either on Mondays and Thursdays, or on Tuesdays and Fridays) for 10 to 20 weeks. Individual treatments initially last up to a few minutes (with an increased duration with each subsequent visit if tolerated). The total visit may take up to half an hour. The total number of treatments you have will depend on your response to treatment and on your specific skin condition.

What are the risks with PUVA phototherapy?
Your doctor or nurse will discuss the possible complications of this treatment with you in more detail, but you need to be aware of the possible side effects listed below.

Effects that could happen during your course

- It is likely that you will get a mild sunburn reaction at least once during your course. If you get any severe sunburn-like reactions then you should contact the Phototherapy Unit and speak to one of the photo nurses. If there is any delay in getting further advice, you can apply steroid ointment (if you have some) as well as moisturisers.
- You may get a spotty, itchy rash (prickly heat). This affects about 1 in 10 people.
- If you skin goes brown easily in sunlight you may develop a dark tan.
- Your skin may become dry and itchy.
- If taking 8-methoxypsoralen (8-MOP), you might feel sick after taking the tablets. This can be helped by switching to a different tablet called 5-methoxypsoralen (5-MOP).
- Psoralen tablets may increase the levels of caffeine from coffee, tea and cola in your blood. If you feel ‘jittery’ on your PUVA days, try reducing the amount of caffeinated drinks you have.
- Cold sores may affect 1 in 30 people who have PUVA phototherapy to the facial area. Tell your nurse if you notice early signs of a cold sore such as tingling or a painful bump developing on your lips. If you have a history of cold sores we will apply sunblock to your lips before each treatment.
• The disease being treated may worsen instead of improve. Your doctor will advise you of the risk of this happening.

If you develop any of these side effects or any other symptoms that you think may be PUVA-related, please talk to the nursing staff. Always inform a member of staff if you are unwell or unable to attend treatment.

Risks associated with multiple courses

Skin cancer
People who have had a lot of sunlight exposure have an increased risk of cancer. In the UK approximately 1 in 10 of us will develop skin cancer. This risk is higher with PUVA than with sunlight and is related to the amount of overall whole-body PUVA treatments you have had. It is usual practice to be asked to attend your local clinic for a skin cancer review once you have received more than 200 PUVA treatments.

Photoaging
If you need many treatments you may develop sunlight-induced skin changes, such as wrinkling and skin discolouration, similar to those of the ageing process or produced by cigarette smoking.

Will I have any follow-up appointments?
You will usually have a follow-up appointment with a doctor six months after your treatment, or sooner if you are having problems. You will be able to book your appointments in advance. Generally you will be offered appointments as near to your preferred time slot as possible, however we cannot guarantee the same time slot for all your visits.

Consent – asking for your consent
We want to involve you in decisions about your care and treatment. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This states that you agree to have the treatment and you understand what it involves.

If you would like more information about our consent process, please speak to a member of staff caring for you.

Contact us
If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, please contact the Dowling Phototherapy Department, t: 020 7188 6290 (Monday to Friday, 7.30am-5.30pm)

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

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, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Leaflet number: 4758/VER1
Date published: June 2019
Review date: June 2022
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A list of sources is available on request