Phototesting

This leaflet will 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 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 UV and visible light. Phototesting is not painful and should be a totally comfortable experience.

- The monochromator is used to separate sunlight into different types and colours (wavelengths) of light. We mainly use UV 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 area tested is roughly the same size as the end of a pencil (5mm in diameter). The test takes about 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. Six small areas on your 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, and you will need to lay on our couch.

What happens during phototesting?
You will be shown to a private treatment room where you will be asked to remove your shirt or top and wear a hospital gown with the opening at the back.

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 by our doctors the next day.

This first visit takes about one and a half hours. You will need to come back the next day so that your results can be checked. The consultant dermatologist will discuss what the test results mean, and advise you on the relevant treatment. During this second visit you will also 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 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 UV and visible light we use for testing are roughly the same as those experienced from 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 a good idea 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 containing all the test results, the diagnosis and the treatment plan, will go to your referring consultant, your general practitioner (GP), and you will also receive a copy.

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 (taken by mouth) medicines, sprays or inhalers. Your family doctor will be able to give you this information if you are unsure.
- Any over-the-counter medicines or 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.

What else do I need to know?
- If possible, wear dark coloured clothing for the tests as the marker pen may stain pale fabrics.
- Children under 18 must be accompanied by a parent/guardian.
- Adults can 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** call us for advice if you are taking immunosuppressant medicines (medicines that suppress your immune system), for example, oral steroids (such as prednisolone, ciclosporin, or azathioprine). As these will affect your phototest results.
- **Do not** apply moisturisers or steroid creams (such as Betnovate® or Dermovate®) to your back and tummy for three days before the tests start.
- **Do not** take antihistamines 48 hours before the phototests begin, as they will affect your skin’s reaction to the tests. We will advise you when you can start taking them again after the testing is complete.
- **Do not** wash off the marks on your back or tummy until all readings are complete.
- **Do not** take any new medication or apply any cream or ointments 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, **t: 020 7188 8141**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Out of hours, please leave a message and they’ll contact you the next working day.

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

Useful sources of 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, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm**

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk**

**t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) e: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk**

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch. **t: 020 7188 8815 e: languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk**

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day. **t: 111**