Topical PUVA phototherapy

Your doctor has referred you to the Dowling Phototherapy Unit for a course of topical 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 topical PUVA?
PUVA therapy is a treatment in which a medication called psoralen (P) is applied to the skin before exposure of the skin to UVA wavelengths of light. The psoralen can be applied in a variety of ways:

- by bathing the whole body in psoralen solution
- by soaking of parts of the body, for example hands and feet, in a basin of psoralen solution
- by applying the psoralen preparation in gel form directly onto the affected areas.

Your doctor will discuss with you the most suitable method of treatment for you. The psoralen reacts in the skin with the UVA to help improve or clear a variety of skin conditions. It also makes you more sensitive to sunlight UVA (the rays that get through cloud and window glass) during the 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), oral PUVA (where psoralen is taken as a tablet by mouth) 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 tablet medication. Topical PUVA therapy has been found to be a particularly useful treatment for many skin conditions, such as psoriasis, mycosis fungoides and many more. It is often used if UVB treatment has failed, 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 treatment days you should 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.

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 bath PUVA treatments
Psoralen can make both the skin and the eyes sensitive to light for some hours. Occasionally you may be required to wear sunglasses or protective eye goggles, depending on the type of topical PUVA you are having and the extent of your skin disease.

Male genital protection must be worn for whole-body bath PUVA treatments. Ask your nursing team about this.

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. **If you are only having your hands or feet treated, this test is not always necessary.**
You will need to soak in a bath with psoralen solution for 15 minutes before the MPD testing. The testing takes around 20 minutes and the result will be read four days later. Your result will help us to decide on your starting dose in the machine. **Your first treatment in the UVA machine will only happen on your second visit** (unless you are just having your hands and feet treated).

### What happens during treatment?

If you are having bath PUVA, you will need to soak in a bath for 15 minutes before your treatment starts. We assess your skin before this to ensure there are no problems.

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 bath. We will give you goggles to protect your eyes, which you must wear at all times during your treatment. We will show you how to stand in the correct position in the machine to make sure that all your skin is exposed evenly.

You will be in the UVA machine from one to 20 minutes. 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 12 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 45 minutes. The total number of treatments will depend on your response to treatment and on your specific skin condition. We do our best to keep to your appointment time, but occasionally there may be a short queue. Please ask one of the nurses if you are concerned about your waiting time.

The total number of treatments you have will depend on 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.
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. Please remember to keep all your appointments and let us know if you cannot attend for any reason.

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