Oral PUVA Treatment

Patient Questions and Answers

This leaflet aims to answer the most commonly asked questions, but please feel free to ask your nurse or doctor if you are unsure of anything.

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What is Oral PUVA?
PUVA therapy is a treatment in which a medication called psoralen (P) is taken by mouth 2 hours before exposure of the skin to ultraviolet A 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. It also makes you more sensitive to sunlight UVA (the rays that get through cloud and window glass) during the treatment.

Why am I having Oral PUVA?
Oral PUVA therapy has been found to be a particularly useful treatment for many skin conditions including psoriasis and plaque stage mycosis fungoides. It is occasionally used in other conditions if UVB treatment has failed for example eczema or vitiligo. Oral PUVA is best regarded as a drug treatment, with the drug activated by the UVA, rather than a "light treatment". Because it is so different in how it works compared with treatment with UVB alone it can often work when UVB has been inadequate.

What happens when I arrive at the Phototherapy clinic?
On your first visit a member of the phototherapy nursing staff will go through the nursing documents used. They will 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 again for a series of small test doses, called MPD (minimal phototoxic dose) testing. A number of doses of ultraviolet A will be shone on small squares on your back, 2 hours after you have taken a standard dose of psoralen tablet. This takes around 30 minutes and the result will be read 4 days later. This result will help decide what dose of UVA the PUVA treatment is started at. It also makes sure that the dose of psoralen given is correct for you in that it leads to enough psoralen in your skin to cause a reaction.

What are psoralens?
There are two types of psoralen tablets that can be used for PUVA. There is one called 8-Methoxypsoralen (8-MOP) and one called 5-Methoxypsoralen (5-MOP). The names refer to different chemical structures: 8-MOP is not stronger than 5-MOP. For most conditions 8-MOP is usually used as we have most experience with it. The usual reason why some people need to switch to 5-MOP is because in some people 8-MOP causes troublesome nausea (feeling sick).

What are the side effects of psoralens?
The main psoralen effects that we want only occur where psoralen reacts with UVA light. Psoralens are found in various vegetables so the human body is used to dealing with them. The only common side effect is of nausea. This is nearly always a side effect of 8-MOP and not of 5-MOP.

How long will I have PUVA treatment?
This varies from person to person, but an average course lasts 12 weeks with individual treatments lasting up to a few minutes with the total visit taking up to half an hour. The nursing staff will assess you at each visit; if you need to see a doctor we can arrange this.
What about my creams?
Please continue to use regular moisturisers during your treatment. If you use any other treatment creams the nursing staff will tell you if you should carry on using them. If you have eczema it is particularly important to continue to apply moisturisers before and after treatment. Please check that you are using appropriate moisturisers and try to keep roughly (+/- 1 hour) the same time between when you apply your moisturiser and when you have PUVA treatment.

What about my medicines?
Before you start PUVA treatment the doctor will check the medications and natural supplements that you are taking.

If any medications you are taking (including anything you are taking over-the-counter) are changed during PUVA treatment, please let the nursing staff know before they start your next treatment. This is because some tablets can interact with oral psoralens and affect the way this treatment works.

Things to avoid
- On the day of treatment please avoid using perfumed products such as, cosmetics, perfumes or aftershave as these can make your skin more sensitive to the light.
- You should not use any salicylic acid preparations or moisturisers containing yellow soft paraffin before treatment as this can act as a sunscreen and stop the treatment working.
- You should not plan a pregnancy during your PUVA treatment. While no problems have been reported it is a good rule to avoid PUVA when you are pregnant. If pregnancy does occur, you must tell your supervising doctor.
- During your course of PUVA you should avoid sunbathing, sunbeds and using sunless tanning (“fake tan”) products.
- You should avoid severe haircuts during your course of treatment. If necessary, have your hair cut prior to starting treatment or within the first two weeks.
- You must not use spray deodorants in the Phototherapy treatment area.
- If you wear clothing during treatment it is important that you wear the same clothing or exact same style for every treatment of the course.
- You should avoid alcohol before your treatment.

Effects that could happen during your course:
- It is likely that you will get a mild sunburn reaction at least once during your course.
- You may get a spotty, itchy rash during your course (about one out of 10 people do).
- Depending on your natural skin colour, if your skin goes brown easily in sunlight, you may develop a dark tan.
- If taking 8-methoxypsoralen (8-MOP) you might feel sick after swallowing the drug. This can be avoided by switching you over to 5-methoxypsoralen (5-MOP).
- A prickling or painful sensation of the skin.
- Psoralen tablets can increase the levels of caffeine from coffee, tea, and cola drinks, in your blood. If you feel “jittery” on your PUVA days try reducing the amount of caffeinated drinks you have.

If you develop any of these side effects or any other event you think may be PUVA related please talk to the nursing staff.
Are there any risks associated with having many courses?

- **Skin Cancer**
  People who have a lot of sunlight exposure have an increased risk of skin cancer. The risk is higher with PUVA than with sunlight and is related to the amount of overall whole body PUVA treatments you have.

All treatments carry risks as well as benefits. This risk needs to be weighed against how the condition you are having treated affects you and the risks of any alternative treatments.

**Review:** You will be asked to attend your local clinic for a yearly specific skin cancer review if you receive more than 200 PUVA treatments

- **Photoaging**
  It is also possible that if you need many treatments, you may develop sunlight induced skin changes with wrinkling and skin discolouration, similar to that of the ageing process or produced by cigarette smoking.

**Special requirements for PUVA treatment**
Psoralen tablets make both the skin and the eyes sensitive to light for some hours. You must wear protective glasses during daylight and indoor light exposure until the end of the day after you take your tablets to avoid increasing the risk of cataracts (clouding of the lens of the eye). In some situations where there is an increased worry about possible cataract risk you might be advised to wear the glasses for 24 hours (except when sleeping or driving at night). You must also wear the protective goggles and faceshield provided during treatment unless the doctor tells you not to.

You need to take extra care throughout the course of PUVA treatment to protect the skin from light. UVA light can penetrate through glass therefore care needs to be taken both indoors and while outside during daylight hours.

**Final Points**
- The prescribed number of tablets should be taken 2 hours before attending for treatment and the test dose. They should not be taken on an empty stomach but with a small amount of food. However, do not take them with a full meal as this can prevent them from being effective.
- The close fitting goggles provided should not be removed while in the cubicle.
- Most patients will be treated without clothing in the cabinet; however, male patients should wear genital protection, for example, a sport support or sock during treatment.
- You should avoid alcohol before your treatment.
- Valuables are your responsibility.
- If you have a history of frequent cold sores, you should apply “sunblock” cream as instructed to the affected area before each treatment, if you are not advised to wear a faceshield during treatment.
- If you are taking warfarin this should be monitored closely during your course of treatment.