Topical PUVA Treatment

Patient Questions and Answers

This information sheet aims to answer the most commonly asked questions, about Topical PUVA. Please feel free to ask your Nurse or Doctor if you are unsure of anything.

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**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 ultraviolet A wavelengths of light. Sometimes the medication is given as tablets. Another way of having PUVA is Topical PUVA. In this treatment the psoralen is applied to the skin before exposure of the skin to ultraviolet A wavelengths of light.

The psoralen can be applied in a variety of ways:
- Soaking part of the body, for example, hands or feet, in a basin of psoralen solution.
- Bathing the whole body in psoralen solution.
- Applying the psoralen preparation directly on 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 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 Topical PUVA?**

Topical PUVA therapy can be a useful treatment for many skin conditions including psoriasis, eczema, mycosis fungoides, vitiligo and many more. It is often used if UVB has failed to improve skin conditions adequately. Topical PUVA is best regarded as a drug treatment, with the drug applied on the skin then activated by 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 and will show you round the unit. They will explain the treatment and all the procedures to you.

Before you begin the light treatment you will need to attend for a small test dose, called MPD (minimal phototoxic dose). If you are only having your hands or feet treated this test is not always necessary.

You will have to soak in a bath with psoralen solution for 15 minutes first then doses of ultraviolet A will be shone on small squares on your back. This takes around 20 minutes and the result will be read 4 days later. This reading will help decide what dose the light treatment is started at.

The doctor will have checked the medicines that you are taking at the moment, if your tablets (including anything you have obtained over-the-counter) change in any way please let the nursing staff know before they start your next treatment. This is because some tablets can affect the way the treatment works.

**What is the psoralen?**

The psoralen used for topical PUVA in Scotland is 8-Methoxypsoralen (8-MOP).

**What are the side effects of psoralens?**

Because the amount of psoralen that is absorbed into your system, even with bath PUVA, is low there is almost no risk of general side effects. Psoralens are found in various vegetables so the human body is used to dealing with them. The amount of psoralen absorbed when you have topical PUVA is rarely more than many people get from their food.
How long will I have PUVA treatment?
This varies from person to person. Usually it is given twice a week, and an average course is 14 weeks. 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 any recommended moisturisers during your course of treatment. If you use any other treatment creams the nursing staff will tell you if you should carry on using them.

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 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 the course of PUVA treatment you should avoid sunbathing and using sunbeds.
- You should avoid severe haircuts during your course of treatment if you are having treatment to your face/neck. If necessary, have your hair cut prior to starting treatment or within the first two weeks.
- You should avoid using sunless tanning (“fake tan”) products to treated areas during your course of treatment.
- If you wear clothing during treatment it is important that you wear the same clothes or exact same style for every treatment of the course.
- If using gel PUVA it is especially important to make sure that the gel is not accidentally applied to other areas that might be exposed to sunlight.

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 you develop any of these side effects or any other change causing you concern, please talk to the nursing staff.

Effects that could happen after many courses
- Skin Cancer
People who have a lot of sunlight exposure have an increased risk of 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**
The psoralen preparation makes the skin more sensitive to sunlight, so you should take extra caution to protect your skin from sunlight throughout the course of treatment. UVA light can penetrate through glass so you need to take care both indoors as well as while outside during daylight hours. You must also wear the protective goggles and faceshield provided during treatment unless the doctor tells you not to.

**Final Points**
- Patients attending for whole body treatment will have to soak in a bath of psoralen solution for 15 minutes then receive UVA treatment immediately.
- Patients attending for topical PUVA to localised areas will have the preparation applied, then wait in the department for a further 15 minutes before UVA treatment.
- Patients attending for hand and/or feet treatment will soak the affected area in a basin of psoralen solution for 15 minutes then wait in the department for a further 30 minutes before UVA treatment.
- You should not remove the close fitting goggles provided while in the cubicle.
- Most patients who are having whole body treatment 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.
- You should avoid sun exposure during the course of treatment.
- Valuables are your responsibility.
- If you have a history of frequent cold sores, “sunblock” cream should be applied before each treatment, if you are not advised to wear a faceshield during treatment.