Trusted Information Creator
Patient Information Forum

NHS
University Hospitals of Leicester
NHS Trust

Having whole body PUVA phototherapy to treat your skin condition

Dermatology Department

Information for Patients

Last reviewed: August 2026
Next review: August 2029
Leaflet number: 375 Version: 4

What is phototherapy?

Phototherapy means to treat medical conditions with light. Ultraviolet A (UVA) and B (UVB) wavelengths are part of the spectrum of natural sunlight which have been shown to be most effective in treating some skin conditions. We can reproduce these wavelengths of light using specially coated fluorescent tubes within our UV light cabinet. The type of phototherapy used depends on the skin condition that you have and how it responded to any previous treatments.

What is PUVA?

PUVA involves taking a 'psoralen' tablet along with having the UVA treatment. Psoralen is a chemical. It makes the skin more sensitive to UV light. This makes the light treatment work better and reduces inflammation in the skin.

Psoralen is swallowed as a tablet 2 hours before treatment.

What conditions can PUVA be used for?

PUVA is used in a range of skin conditions such as eczema, psoriasis, cutaneous T cell lymphoma, generalized pruritus (itching) and other less common conditions.

Will it work for me?

Most people will see an improvement in their skin condition, but it does not work for everyone. The improvement may last weeks, months or sometimes years after you stop treatment.

You should not have PUVA phototherapy if:

- you are unable to attend regularly for treatment.
- you are unable to stand unaided for 10 minutes.
- your skin condition is made worse by natural sunlight.
- you have had skin cancer, unless discussed with your consultant.
- you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

- you are taking any medications which make you more sensitive to sunlight or suppress the immune system, unless discussed with your consultant.
- you have severe liver or kidney disease.

Your first visit

On your first visit you will be shown the phototherapy room by the nurse.

We will ask you some questions and explain what is involved in the treatment to you. We will also answer any questions you may have.

Please bring a list of your current medications, creams and ointments.

We will then assess your skin so that we can monitor your response to the treatment. The nurse may take photographs of your skin, please tell them if you do not want photographs taken. These photographs are used to keep track of your skin condition so we can see any changes.

Space is limited in the treatment area. Please do not bring anyone else with you to your appointment unless it is essential. Please do not bring your children with you to your appointment.

Children having treatment must have a parent or carer with them.

Please arrive on time and allow plenty of time for parking. Clinics can be busy and you may not be offered treatment if you are late.

On the day of treatment

Your treatment will be 2 times a week. Most people have between 15 and 30 treatments. This depends on your response to treatment and underlying skin condition.

You will be given a time for treatment. It is very important that you attend your appointments. Missed appointments reduce the effectiveness of treatment and can increase your risk of sunburn. So, it is essential that you attend regularly.

The first few treatments will usually be very quick, often less than a minute. The length of time will usually get longer at each visit.

You will be shown how to stand in the UV cabinet to make sure all possible areas are exposed to the light.

The nurse will assess your response to previous treatments each time you attend. Please tell them if you have any concerns or side effects.

Taking psoralen tablets

You will be prescribed methoxypsoralen tablets to be taken **2 hours before treatment**, with or after food.

You will need to buy glasses/ sunglasses with a minimum of UVA 400 protection. These are worn for 24 hours after taking the tablets. The tablets make the eyes sensitive to light and protection is very important. If you do not protect your eyes at this time, it can cause long term damage.

Psoralen sensitises all your skin to UV light, not just the treated areas. This means you must be very careful and use sunscreen and avoid exposure to light (including through windows) after your treatment and for the rest of the day.

You must tell the nurse when you only have 3 weeks supply left, so they can order more.

The methoxypsoralen dose depends on how much you weigh. Please let the nurses know if you have had a large gain or loss in your weight since seeing the doctor or starting treatment.

What to bring with you

Please bring any clothing you intend to wear during treatment. For example, a long-sleeved top if only your legs are being treated.

You will be given a pair of protective goggles to wear during treatment. Please bring them with you to every appointment.

If your face is not affected and does not need treatment, we will give you a visor that must be worn. This visor stays at the clinic.

Males must protect the genital area. This is more sensitive to UV light than the surrounding skin. You must wear dark-coloured underwear. You must wear the same pair of underwear each time. They should be double thickness Y-fronts. If the hips, buttocks or groin need treatment a clean dark sock can be worn to cover the genitals.

Females do not need to wear protection to the genitals. If the hips, buttocks or groin are not affected you can wear pants. You must wear the same pair of pants every time. They cannot be lace.

If you do not bring your protective wear (that is a sock) you cannot have treatment. If you forget your goggles, please tell the nurse and they will give you a new pair. You cannot have treatment without goggles on.

You will need to remove all jewellery unless it is something you never take off such as a wedding ring. It is important to make sure that the same areas are covered and that you stand in the same position for every treatment to avoid burning.

Before and after treatment

- Do not apply any other creams, moisturizer, sprays or cosmetics 2 hours before treatment
- You can use your usual moisturiser up to 2 hours before your treatment. However, other creams or ointments such as steroid creams, Protopic (tacrolimus) ointment or Dovonex/ Dovobet preparations should not be applied to areas to be treated with UV light on the day of your treatment. If you are unsure, ask your phototherapy nurse.
- Avoid perfumed products such as body sprays, aftershave, perfumes or deodorant directly before treatment. Do not wear makeup to your treatment.
- Do not drink alcohol before treatment.
- Avoid foods such as celery, carrots, figs, citrus fruits, parsnips and parsley whilst having treatment. These can make you more sensitive to ultraviolet light.
- Always moisturise after your treatment to prevent dryness and itching.

- You can use all your normal skin care products after treatment.
- Avoid more sun exposure or the use of sunbeds. More exposure to sunlight may cause burning. Wear a high factor sunscreen and cover up with hat and long sleeves if outside in the sunshine. You must not use sunbeds whilst you are having treatment.
- Please tell the nurse if you have started any new regular medications during your treatment as some medications can make your skin more sensitive to light.
- Avoid getting your hair cut short during the course of treatment as this can lead to burning of previously covered skin.
- Do not forget to wear your UV protective glasses for 24 hours after treatment.
- Avoid going to a sauna during your treatment as it can cause skin dryness.

Possible side effects

- All reactions must be reported to staff so that the dose can be adjusted if necessary.
- Short term side effects
- Redness and discomfort, similar to mild sunburn.
- Itchy or dry skin. If you have this, apply additional moisturiser.
- Prickly heat rash (polymorphic light eruption or PLE).
- Cold sores. If you usually get cold sores, this may be worse during UV light treatment. Using a high factor sun cream to your lips can help prevent this.
- Inflammation of the hair roots (folliculitis).
- Blisters in treatment areas. Please contact the department if you develop blisters within 24 hours of your treatment. We will arrange for you to see a doctor.
- Feeling sick (nausea) because of the methoxypsoralen tablets.
- Some patients' skin condition can get worse

Possible long-term risks

- Skin cancer - as with natural sunlight, prolonged and repeated courses of UV light can lead to a higher risk of skin cancer. There are no limits to the number of treatments you may have over a lifetime. Having more than 200 whole body PUVA treatments means that you will need yearly skin checks to look for skin cancer. The nurse will keep a record of the amount of treatments you have had.
- Premature aging of the skin, freckling and wrinkling may also be linked with long term UV light treatment.
- There is a slight increased risk of cataracts if UV protective glasses are not worn after treatment.
- **PUVA treatment is not safe during pregnancy or breastfeeding.** If you think you may be pregnant or planning to become pregnant, please talk to the nurse.

Discharge information

- You may be discharged after 24 to 30 treatments when your skin is clear or if there is no change to your skin. We do not carry on with treatment if there is no improvement. We do not carry on with treatment if your skin has cleared.
- After discharge you should use your moisturisers daily even if your skin looks and feels better.
- If your skin condition comes back after you are discharged, you can use your prescription creams to treat these areas.
- After discharge you can ‘top up’ your skin with natural sunlight. You can expose your skin to the sun in short periods to help your skin condition. Please avoid burning in the sun. We do not advise using sunbeds.
- If your skin condition comes back in the future, you may be able to have phototherapy again. Please speak to your GP or dermatology doctor who can refer you for another course of phototherapy.

What if I have any questions?

Phototherapy staff are always happy to answer any questions that you may have, either at your first assessment or at any time during your course of treatment.

Contact numbers and opening hours:

St Peters Health Centre: 0116 258 5221 (Phototherapy Unit)
Monday to Friday 8am to 5pm

Loughborough Hospital: 01509 564376 (Phototherapy Room)
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday - 8am to 5pm

Melton Hospital: 01664 800118 (Phototherapy Room) or 01664 800127 (Nursing Office) Tuesday and Friday - 7.30am to 11am

Hinckley Hospital: 01455 441562
Tuesday and Thursday - 8.15am to 5pm

What to do if you cannot attend

Missing your appointments will mean your treatment will not work as well. It is very important that you attend regularly. If you think that you may have a problem with attending appointments, then please talk to the nursing team and they will try to help you with this. If you have any holidays booked, please tell the nurses.

If you are unable to attend for any reason, please let the nurse know as soon as possible using the contact numbers above. If there is no answer, leave a message with your name, date of birth, contact details and/or hospital number if you know it.

If you do not attend 2 appointments without letting us know you will be discharged from the Phototherapy Department.

Where can I get more information?

British Association of Dermatologists (BAD):
www.bad.org.uk/pils/phototherapy-oral-puva/

Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice
Visit www.uhleicester.nhs.uk for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals.
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact uhl-tr.informationforpatientsmailbox@nhs.net

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور زبان میں درکار ہیں، تو براہِ کرم مندرجہ ذیل نمبر پر ٹیلی فون کریں۔
ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਹੇਠਾਂ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਗਏ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਟੈਲੀਫੋਨ ਕਰੋ।
إذا كنت ترغب في الحصول على هذه المعلومات بلغةٍ أُخرى، الرجاء الاتصال على رقم الهاتف الذي يظهر في الأسفل
Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku, proszę zadzwonić pod podany niżej numer telefonu
જો તમને અન્ય ભાષામાં આ માહિતી જોઈતી હોય, તો નીચે આપેલ નંબર પર કૃપા કરી ટેલિફોન કરો.

If you would like this information in another language or format such as EasyRead
or Braille, please telephone 0116 250 2959 or email uhl-tr.equalitymailbox@nhs.net

We are a research hospital and you may be asked to take part in research

Re-use of this leaflet is restricted by Creative Commons license