

# Patch testing your skin for contact dermatitis

## Dermatology

Information for Patients

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### What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to help you learn more about your patch testing. It tells you what a patch test is and what is involved.

### What is patch testing?

Patch testing is a specialist procedure. It is done by dermatology doctors and dermatology nurses. The aim is to find out if your skin condition is caused or made worse by an allergy to substances which have come into contact with your skin. This is called contact allergy. Substances that cause an allergic reaction are called allergens. They can be found at home, at work or in leisure activities.

### What will be tested?

There are more than 40 substances which are often in contact with the skin. These include rubber, preservatives, metals, perfumes, toiletries and cosmetics among others. Other substances are sometimes added to this list if it is thought they may trigger your skin condition. You may also be tested with some of your own work or home products, such as personal toiletries.

### What should I bring to the patch test clinic?

On the first appointment please bring:

- a list of medication - any prescribed drugs you are taking.
- all ointments and creams you use. These include those prescribed and those you may have bought yourself.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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- your own products - items you use at home which you think may be causing or making your skin condition worse such as toiletries, cosmetics, nail polish, perfumes and hair products. If you put any products directly on your skin then please bring both the product and the packaging. Please bring any leaflet, where the ingredients are listed. For other items such as household cleansers, washing powder and fabric softeners, you only need to bring the packaging showing the list of ingredients.
- **if you have been asked by your doctor or nurse to bring any particular product or substance, it is important to remember to bring them with you.**
- products and chemicals used at work. If you think that substances at work may be making your skin condition worse please bring in the Health and Safety data sheets (sometimes called the COSHH sheets) of these products. These will be available at your place of work. You may need to speak to the Head of Health and Safety. You may be asked to bring samples of these products for testing, if needed.

## What does patch testing involve?

You will need to go to the hospital for 2 visits in 1 week.

On the first visit, each substance to be tested will be put on your back in special small discs (about 1cm in diameter). These are held in place by hypoallergenic tape. The location of the discs is identified by marking your back with tape. Sometimes the arms or the thighs are also used to patch test. Itching of the test areas is normal, but you are strongly advised not to scratch. Your first visit should take about 2 hours.

- Your patch tests need to be kept dry. A shallow bath may be taken or shower the front of your body only. Make sure the room does not become too steamy as this can cause the patches to fall off.
- There is a slight chance of the dyes in the patch tests leaking and staining your clothes, so avoid light colour clothing or your best clothes. Wearing a vest or t-shirt in bed may help to stop the patches falling off.
- Avoid sport that involves a lot of arm movement or causes you to sweat. Going to work should not be a problem for most people.
- It is rare for the patches to cause itching that is unbearable, but if it does you could take an antihistamine tablet. This does not usually affect the results of the test. Some people may get a blistering reaction. If this happens, cover with a dry dressing such as a simple plaster and let it heal naturally.

The tests will stay taped in place until Wednesday morning. You will be asked to take the tape off carefully at home leaving the pen markings in place. You will then take 1 photo of the area of the back used for patch testing. You will bring this to your Friday appointment.

**Please keep your back dry and do not wash off the marker pen.**

On the Friday visit, your back will be examined and any reactions will be discussed with you. We may

to expose part of your arm or back to ultraviolet light if a reaction to sunlight is suspected. This is called 'photopatch testing'.

It is possible that your patch tests will be negative. This is also helpful to your doctor as contact allergy will be ruled out as a cause of your skin problem. Positive reactions become red and itchy where the substance was put on your skin. They usually become obvious by the 3rd visit (final reading). A reaction can sometimes take up to 2 weeks. If you do get a late reaction, please contact your clinic.

Some substances may stain the skin. This is normal. It will wash off after a couple of days with showering or bathing.

Your doctor may decide **not** to patch test if you:

- are pregnant
- are breastfeeding
- have a lot of eczema on your back
- have a suntan
- have used a sunbed in the past 2 weeks
- are on steroid tablets or are taking immunosuppressive drugs

If in doubt or if any of these apply, please phone the clinic to rearrange your appointment.

### **Do not:**

- do not get your back wet or bath, swim or shower during the week of the tests. A cool shallow bath is a good choice.
- do not wear special or pale-coloured clothing. The tests and the marker ink may permanently stain it.
- do not expose your back to the sun or artificial sunlight (sun lamps) during testing.

### **Do:**

- avoid sport or heavy physical work during the week of the tests, as sweating will cause the patches to fall off.
- wear an old bra or shirt for the week of the tests and wear a shirt or vest to sleep in to protect the patches. Clothes that open at the front can be easier to take on and off than those which go over your head.
- if a patch starts to peel off, tape the edges down using Micropore or ScanPor. If a whole patch comes loose, remove it and note the time and date.
- contact your clinic if you are concerned.

### **Are there any side effects?**

Side effects are rare, but might include:

- skin reddening and itching where the discs were (a positive test result). This usually goes away after a few days. A strongly positive patch test may cause a blister. Some positive test reactions may stay for up to a month before fading away (persistent reaction).
- flare up of eczema - a positive patch test may also see by a flare up of your existing or previous eczema.
- pigment change - an increase or decrease in pigment may be seen at the place where the patches are. This may last for months or rarely (1 in 1,000) be permanent.
- infection - this is rare.
- scarring - very rare (1 in 10,000).
- allergy - rarely (1 in 5,000 patch tests), you may become allergic to one of the substances applied during patch testing. In practice, this does not appear to cause problems in the long term.

## Storage of patch test results

For audit purposes, patch test results are often recorded in a computer database. This is used to improve the quality of the results of patch testing nationally. This is in line with good medical practice. The anonymised data may be used for research and shared with other medical centres.

## Where can I get more information about patch testing?

<https://dermnetnz.org/topics/patch-tests/>

This patient information leaflet was written with the British Society for Cutaneous Allergy.

For details of source materials used please contact the Clinical Standards Unit (clinicalstandards@bad.org.uk).

## Contact details

If you need to contact us urgently between visits please call:

Leicester Royal Infirmary - 0116 258 5455

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