

## Patient information factsheet

# Psoralen ultraviolet light A (PUVA) treatment

**Your dermatology doctor has referred you for a course of psoralen ultraviolet light A (PUVA) for your skin condition. We hope this factsheet will help answer some of the questions you may have.**

Ultraviolet (UV) rays are produced by the sun and are grouped into different wavelengths. Ultraviolet light A (UVA) is one of the wavelengths that have been found to be useful in treating certain skin conditions. PUVA is a combination of a drug called psoralen (P) and ultraviolet light A (UVA), hence the term PUVA.

The drug psoralen makes your skin (and your eyes if you take psoralen tablets) sensitive to sunlight. For 24 hours after taking psoralen, you must protect your skin and eyes from sunlight (even through window glass).

Throughout your course of PUVA treatment, you should protect your skin from sunlight and other sunlamps or tanning lamps. This is because extra exposure to sunlight is very likely to disrupt your course of treatment and may increase your risk of developing side effects such as burning and skin cancer.

### Taking psoralen before your UVA treatment

Depending on your skin condition, you will be instructed to take psoralen before your UVA treatment in one of the following ways:

- **Tablet PUVA: taking psoralen tablets by mouth**

You will be given psoralen tablets that should be taken two hours before you have your UVA light treatment. We advise taking these with food to reduce the likelihood of feeling sick. The tablets will make your skin and eyes sensitive to the UVA in sunlight for 24 hours.

During the 24-hour period after you take the tablets, you should:

- keep your skin covered with clothing and/or apply sunblock
- wear glasses that protect your eyes from UVA
- reduce your sun exposure through windows

- **Bath PUVA: soaking your skin in psoralen liquid**

You will be asked to come into the Southampton dermatology centre just before your UVA treatment to soak your body in a bath of water containing psoralen liquid for 15 minutes. The areas of your body soaked in the psoralen bath will need to be protected from sunlight throughout your course of treatment.

- **Hand and foot PUVA: soaking your hands and/or feet in psoralen liquid**

Before your UVA treatment you will be asked to soak your hands and/or feet in bowls of psoralen liquid and water for 15 minutes. You will then need to cover them with gloves and/or socks to protect them from the UVA in daylight.

The UVA treatment will be given to your hands and/or feet after 45 minutes (although if necessary it can be given up to two hours later). Your hands and/or feet (and anywhere along your forearms and lower legs that have been exposed to psoralen while soaking) will need to be protected from sunlight throughout your course of treatment.

## How often will I need to have this treatment?

You will have to attend a PUVA treatment session every Monday and Friday for up to ten weeks. The maximum number of treatments per course, except for vitiligo and atopic eczema patients, is 30, unless your doctors advise otherwise. You must make sure you can commit to the whole course of treatment before you start.

## What will happen during my course of PUVA treatment?

Before starting your treatment, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm that you agree to have the treatment and you understand what it involves.

You must wear protective eye goggles when having PUVA treatment to prevent damaging your eyes. You may also be asked to wear a protective face visor.

A specially trained nurse, working under the supervision of dermatology doctors, will give you your PUVA treatment in the Southampton dermatology centre. Every time you attend for treatment the nurse will ask you some questions and may examine your skin.

The nurse will then help you to position yourself in a special cabinet containing fluorescent tubes that produce artificial UVA light. The correct dose will be calculated and the UVA light in the cabinet will be turned on. The length of your treatment in the cabinet will depend on many factors such as your skin type (fair or dark) and skin condition. We will increase the dose of UVA slightly with each treatment.

### • If you are having tablet or bath PUVA treatment

We will need to test your skin's reaction to light before you start the course. We will test this on a Monday (or a Thursday) and ask you to come back at the same time the following Friday (or if the test was on Thursday, the following Monday) so that we can assess the area tested. This will allow us to calculate your starting dose of treatment.

In addition to the use of goggles (and in some cases a visor), you will be asked to undress, remove any jewellery and stand in the UVA cabinet.

Male patients must cover their genitals with a snug fitting, close weave, dark coloured sock, thong or underwear. It is very important that the exact same area of skin is covered during each exposure to UVA and that it is never removed during treatment, in order to avoid sunburn and the potential risk of skin cancer in this area.

### • If you are having hand and foot PUVA treatment

You will be asked to remove any jewellery on your hands and/or feet before placing them in the UVA cabinet.

## What are the potential side effects of PUVA treatment?

- **Redness, burning and blistering of the skin:** As with any form of sunlight, UVA may cause your skin to become red, burnt and (rarely) blistered. We try to avoid this, but some tanning and redness of your skin is likely. Please let the nurses know if your skin becomes red, burnt or blistered after your PUVA treatment. This can develop within several hours to a few days after your treatment.
- **Dry skin, itching and discomfort:** PUVA tends to cause dry skin and sometimes itching. It is important to apply moisturisers regularly after you have PUVA treatment to reduce this. Some people experience a burning discomfort that persists after their PUVA treatment. This is very unusual, but unpredictable. Please let the nurse know if you experience itching or discomfort during your course of PUVA treatment.

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- **Nausea (feeling sick):** Nausea is a relatively common side effect with the tablet form of psoralen. You can often reduce this by taking the tablet with a light meal. If this doesn't help, let the nurses know so that an anti-sickness tablet or an alternative form of psoralen can be prescribed.
- **Skin cancer:** Just as sun exposure can increase your risk of skin cancer, PUVA therapy may increase your risk of developing skin cancer. This risk increases with the number of PUVA treatments, so we will give you as few treatments as possible.
- **Premature skin ageing:** Repeated use of PUVA may age your skin. This is another reason for keeping the number of PUVA treatments as low as possible.
- **Rashes:** Please be aware that your skin condition could temporarily worsen during treatment. Very occasionally patients develop an itchy, bumpy rash during the course of treatment known as polymorphic light eruption. If this happens we may alter your treatment to allow this to settle.

## PUVA treatment during pregnancy

There is no evidence that PUVA can harm an unborn baby. However, if pregnancy is suspected at any point during the course, the treatment will be stopped until your baby is born.

## During your course of PUVA treatment:

- **do** keep your skin covered and use a high factor sunscreen on exposed skin (such as face and hands) in sunny weather or when you are exposed to sunlight through window glass.
- **do** let the nurses know if you start using any new medications or creams.
- **do** let the nurses know if you experience any redness, burning, blistering or itching of the skin.
- **do not** sunbathe or use a sun bed.
- **do not** apply perfumes, deodorants, aftershave lotions, other cosmetic products, creams or ointments to your skin within a few hours before your treatment. These can be applied after you have had your PUVA treatment.
- **do not** attend PUVA treatment while under the influence of alcohol (or recreational drugs).
- **do not** have a haircut during the whole course of your treatment if you are having your whole body treated. This is to prevent burning of areas which were previously covered by hair, such as your neck, forehead or ears.
- **do not** take ibuprofen or naproxen if you require pain relief as this may cause your skin to burn.

## How do I book appointments for PUVA treatment?

There is usually a waiting list for PUVA treatment. When it is your turn a nurse will contact you by telephone or letter to book your individual appointment times.

PUVA appointments are made with the nurse on a week-by-week basis and can be booked from 7.15 to 11.45am and 1 to 4.30pm (subject to availability).

We will do our best to offer you a convenient appointment time, which you will be asked to keep for all your appointments if possible. You must contact us if you wish to change or cancel an appointment.

To make sure your treatment is successful you must attend all your appointments. Please let us know if you cannot attend for any reason. If you regularly miss treatments or take breaks without agreeing them in advance, your treatment may not be successful and you may be discharged. That's why we ask that you make every effort to ensure you can attend the full course of treatment before you start.

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## Appointments for children

Appointments from 4pm onwards will be given to children only.

## Alternative treatments

Your doctor has recommended this treatment for you. However, there may be other treatment options available, such as narrowband and broadband UVB, tablets or injections. There are also creams and ointments that can be used alone or at the same time as your PUVA treatment. Please ask your doctor for more information.

Seeking and acting on patient feedback is key to improving the quality of our services. The Friends and Family Test gives you the opportunity to give your view on the care or treatment you've received. You can complete the survey online by visiting <http://www.uhs.nhs.uk/PatientsAndVisitors/Patientexperienceandsatisfaction/Friends-and-Family-Test.aspx> and entering the password **rhmo** when prompted.

## Contact us

You can contact our PUVA nurses by telephone on **023 8054 0203** on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 7.15 to 11.45am and 1 to 4.30pm.

Southampton dermatology centre

Level E, Fanshawe Wing, Royal South Hampshire Hospital, Southampton.

Tel: **023 8054 0204**, opening hours: 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday (Thursday 8am to 2pm only).

## Useful links

[www.bad.org.uk](http://www.bad.org.uk)

**If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.**