Treating your skin condition with PUVA therapy

Introduction
You have been referred to the Phototherapy unit in Gainsborough Wing at Colchester General Hospital for a course of PUVA ultraviolet treatment for your skin condition. PUVA is also known as photochemotherapy. This leaflet explains this treatment in detail, including its risks, benefits and alternatives. If you have any concerns or questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse or technician that is caring for you.

What is PUVA?
Ultraviolet rays are produced by the sun. Although they can't be seen, they are an important part of sunlight and are grouped into different wavelengths; UVA, UVB, UVC.

UVA rays penetrate skin and cause it to darken or tan. UVB rays are mostly absorbed by the epidermis, which is the top layer of skin, and are responsible for sunburn. UVC rays are absorbed by the earths ozone layer which means they do not reach us.

PUVA is a combination of a drug called psoralen (P) and long wave ultraviolet radiation (UVA) – hence PUVA.

What can PUVA treat?
It is mainly used to treat psoriasis, but can also be used for other skin conditions such as eczema, vitiligo, mycosis fungoides, and polymorphic light eruption.

What does the treatment involve?
The treatment is given in the phototherapy unit by trained technicians. The psoralen medication is either taken by mouth (before coming to the unit) or it is applied to the skin in a gel form, or a lotion is dissolved in bath water used by the patient at the phototherapy unit.

Depending on what type of psoralen treatment you have been prescribed, the time taken to develop the correct concentration in the skin is as follows:
• two hours after the ingestion of the oral drug
• 20 minutes after the application of the gel
• after 15 minutes soaking in the bath solution.

The UVA treatment is given by the phototherapy technicians. You will need to undress and stand in a phototherapy unit, which is a cabinet containing fluorescent tubes that produce UVA rays.
The machine will be turned on and you will be given a calculated dose of PUVA. This is repeated twice a week over a period of time. You may feel a warm sensation during treatment, but it will not hurt.

**Why should I have PUVA treatment?**
This treatment should help to improve your skin condition. It is often recommended if you have tried ointments and creams without success. However, it is sometimes used in combination with other treatments. Most patients with psoriasis find their skin has improved after treatment with PUVA and remains clear for three to four months or sometimes longer.

Compared to other forms of phototherapy, PUVA has the following benefits:
- for many conditions you are more likely to have longer periods where your skin condition disappears or improves with PUVA than narrowband UVB
- for many (though not all) conditions, PUVA is more effective than narrowband UVB.

**Are there any other alternatives?**
Your Dermatologist recommended this treatment for you. However, there may be other treatments available, such as narrowband UVB.

As well as these treatments, there is a wide variety of creams and ointments that can be used alone or at the same time as PUVA. Oral medications or injections may also be options to consider. Your doctor will explain all the alternatives available to you in more detail. Please make sure you ask questions if you are uncertain.

**Consent**
We must, by law, obtain your written consent before any operation and some other procedures. Staff will explain all the risks, benefits and alternatives before they ask you to sign a consent form. If you are unsure about any aspect of your treatment, please do not hesitate to ask to speak to a senior member of staff.

**On the day of treatment**
Do not wear perfumes, aftershave lotions, deodorants or other cosmetic products. Some of these contain substances which make the skin more sensitive to light. This can cause patchy discolouration of the skin and take some months to fade. You can use these after each treatment. For the same reason, please let us know if you have started any new medications or creams while having treatment because some can make your skin more sensitive to light.

Avoid significant alcohol consumption.

On treatment days please do not apply any creams or ointments to your skin before you go in the machine, apart from an appropriate moisturiser. You should use a water-based moisturiser such as Aqueous cream, E45 or Diprobase.
Do not use oily creams because these could cause burning and prevent the UVA from being absorbed. We suggest that you moisturise before, as this helps your skin to absorb the ultraviolet light.

If you are not sure which creams to use please ask a member of staff.

You will need to reduce your exposure to the sun's rays even through window glass, to minimise the risk of sunburn. PUVA can cause unpleasant sunburn-type reactions if this is not adhered to. For lotion, gel or bath water PUVA, only the areas of skin where the lotion, gel, or bath water has been applied need protection.

Cover up with loose fitting, long sleeved clothes, particularly on sunny days. You may also want to wear a hat. Use a sunscreen with a factor of at least 20 that protects against UVA and UVB rays. Re-apply it regularly.

**Important – please do not sunbathe or use a sunbed during the whole course of your treatment**

If you are having the psoralen as a tablet, you must wear glasses, either your own sunglasses or clear glasses supplied by your optician with special UV filters, from the time when you take the psoralen tablets until nightfall on the day of treatment. This protects your eyes against damage from the PUVA.

Let us know if you have a haircut or for any other reason, any areas of skin become newly exposed during the course of treatment.

**Arriving for your treatment**

On your first visit your skin will be assessed by the phototherapy technician and you will be asked some questions about your condition and any medications or creams you are using.

We usually ask that you remove all your clothing, dressing-gowns are provided.

Men must cover their genitals with either a dark sock or dark jockstrap while in the cabinet. If an area of skin that has previously been covered is exposed to UVA treatment, it may burn.

**What happens during treatment?**

A technician will show you where to get changed. They will examine your skin on each visit and ask you some questions before you enter the machine.

You will be given goggles to protect your eyes and a mask to protect your face. You will be told how to stand in the machine in order to make sure all your affected skin receives the PUVA rays. After we have calculated the correct dose for you we will turn the machine on.

The amount of time you spend in the cabinet will depend on many factors, such as your skin type (fair or dark) and skin condition.
Your starting dose of PUVA may be only a few seconds and will gradually build up. Please allow 15-30 minutes for your treatment including changing, and approximately 45-60 minutes for bath PUVA. We closely monitor the amount of UVA you receive. We will increase the dose of UVA slightly with each treatment as long as you have tolerated the previous treatment.

The machine is quite bright and you may feel warm if you need to stay in the cabinet for a long time. Let us know if you find it uncomfortable because we can give your treatment in divided doses.

**How often will I need to have this treatment?**
This depends on your skin condition but this treatment is usually quite intensive. We generally treat people twice a week over a period of a few weeks.

We do our best to keep to your appointment time, but occasionally there may be a short delay.

**What are the risks?**
Your doctor will discuss the possible complications of this treatment with you, but you need to be aware of the following:
- your skin can occasionally become itchy and dry
- your skin condition could temporarily worsen
- some patients feel nauseous after taking psoralen tablets
- your skin may burn, as with any form of sunlight. We will try to avoid this but some tanning and redness is likely. Please let us know if your skin does become sunburnt which usually develops 8-14 hours after your treatment
- very occasionally patients develop polymorphic light eruption, which is an itchy rash due to sunlight.

As with too much sun exposure, long-term use of PUVA (many months to years) may age your skin and increase your risk of developing skin cancer. This increased risk is very slight at first, but increases after about 150-200 treatments.
If you do not wear the protective goggles in the cabinet, you risk developing a sunburn like reaction to your eyes within a few hours of exposure. It may also increase your risk of developing cataracts in the future. You may open your eyes during treatment only when you are wearing the protective goggles provided.

PUVA is most suitable for people with extensive skin problems, but may not be appropriate if you have very fair skin, or if your condition becomes worse in sunlight. It is also important to note that your skin condition may flare up again after completing the course. If it does, you may need further treatments of PUVA or another type of treatment in the future to manage it.

**What do I need to do after my treatment?**
After your treatment you may want to apply your moisturiser or other creams and ointments.
You can do this in the changing cubicle. Someone will be able to help you if needed. You can then get dressed, book your next appointment and go home or to work.

PUVA tends to cause dryness to the skin so you may find it more comfortable to use your moisturiser regularly, usually twice a day.

If you develop sunburn please treat it in the normal way. If it is severe, please phone for advice. However this is very rare. Please remember to inform the technician of any reactions you may have from your treatments in order that the amount of time you spend in the machine can be adjusted.

Where do I have my treatment?
The phototherapy unit is situated in Gainsborough Wing at Colchester General Hospital. It is open from 7am to 7.30pm on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The phone number is 01206 742276.

Concerns or complaints
If you have any concerns or worries about your care please contact the department responsible. However, if you are unable to resolve your concerns or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Integrated PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service), Complaints and Litigation Service on 01206 745926 or ask any member of staff for a leaflet, which will describe how you can make a complaint.

Your NHS number
When you attend hospital you will be asked for your NHS number and other information such as your address. Please be patient with this procedure – it is to ensure our records are kept up to date and for your safety. However, if you do not know your NHS number, please do not worry – you will still receive care!

Your views
If you or a family member has recently been in either Colchester General Hospital or Essex County Hospital for any reason, you can tell us about your experience by visiting the www.nhs.uk website and clicking on the "Comments" section, or you can write to the address on the front of this leaflet or alternatively, email your comments to info@colchesterhospital.nhs.uk

Adapted from St. Thomas' Hospital, London

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