

What is PUVA treatment?

PUVA is a combination treatment consisting of photosensitising the skin with a photosensitiser called Psoralen (P) and exposing the (temporarily sensitised skin) to long wavelength Ultraviolet A (UVA) light-hence the term PUVA. The psoralen and the UV light in the skin causes improvement of a number of skin conditions.

How is PUVA treatment given?

A qualified phototherapist will always supervise your treatment.

The psoralen can be introduced into the skin in one of two ways:

by taking psoralen tablets or by immersing the skin in a psoralen solution.

Systemic PUVA (Oral PUVA, "tablet PUVA")

Psoralen tablets are taken two hours before exposure to UVA.

The tablets are best taken with a light snack such as toast or a banana as some patients can feel slightly nauseous if they are taken on an empty stomach. If this feeling of sickness is severe, it may be appropriate to switch to different psoralen tablets which are less likely to induce this side effect. Once the tablets are taken the patient immediately puts on a pair of UVA protective glasses (for example, sunglasses), which have been previously tested to ensure their effectiveness in blocking out UV light. The tablets photosensitise the skin and the eyes to UV light, thus making it necessary to protect the eyes. If suitable eye protection is not worn there is a risk that cataracts may develop. The eye protection (sunglasses) must be worn for

12 hours after taking the tablets if there is a risk that the eyes will be exposed to UV light, such as sunlight, as it takes this long for the effects of the psoralen to wear off. UVA passes through glass, so eyes must be protected even indoors, but if the sun has set then the eye protection can be removed.

Systemic PUVA is administered twice a week. Usually about 20 treatments are required for clearance of your skin condition although some skin conditions may take longer to clear than others.

Bath PUVA

The skin can also be sensitised using a psoralen bath. The patient lies in a bath of dilute psoralen solution for 10-15 minutes, then UVA light is administered in the usual way in a phototherapy cabinet. The skin is more sensitised than with oral PUVA, so the times needed for a sufficient UVA dose are shorter. Also, the eyes are not sensitised, so eye protection is not necessary.

Whole-body PUVA treatment takes place in a special phototherapy cabinet, which contains UVA light tubes. Before treatment is commenced the phototherapy nurse may like to establish a safe starting dose for you. This is called an MPD test and it will measure your tolerance to UVA light (in some circumstances an MPD test is not necessary).

The MPD result is used to calculate the initial UVA starting dose.

At subsequent visits, the dose will be increased according to the skin response to the previous treatment.

After each treatment you may develop a mild skin redness, which should cause no discomfort. If at any time you feel that the dose you have been given has caused discomfort or has caused a marked, persisting skin redness (like mild sunburn), you must let the phototherapist know so that further increments can be adjusted.

Bath PUVA is administered three times a fortnight (Mon-Fri-Wed). Usually 20 treatments are required for clearance of your skin condition although some skin conditions may take longer to clear than others.

Hand and Foot soak PUVA

This is used to treat a small area of your body such as the hands and feet. The hands and/or feet are soaked in a warm solution of psoralen in a small bowl for 15 minutes then are exposed to UVA. Generally a small UV light box is used to administer PUVA to affected areas. There is no need to wear eye protection (sunglasses) after hand/foot PUVA as the Psoralen is not absorbed into the general circulation.

Hand/foot soak PUVA treatment is administered three times a fortnight (e.g. Mon – Fri – Wed). You may need to attend for approximately 12-16 weeks.

Safety precautions to take whilst having any form of PUVA

You must avoid sun beds and sunbathing during the course of your treatment.

Protective goggles should always be worn in the cabinet to protect your eyes from UVA light.

Avoid wearing any perfume, deodorant or make-up when you attend for treatment, as your skin may become sensitive to the UV light.

Men must shield their genital area with a sock, jock strap or underpants whilst in the cabinet.

Inform the phototherapy nurse if you start any new medication, over-the-counter tablets (such as vitamin supplements and especially herbal preparations), creams or ointments once you have started your course of PUVA. Be aware that some medications that you may have in your bathroom cabinet (such as simple headache tablets) may cause sensitivity to UV light.

Avoid having your haircut if possible during your course of treatment.

If you do have haircut, inform the phototherapist so that sun block can be applied to previously unexposed skin.

Females **MUST NOT** become pregnant whilst having PUVA.

Ensure that you stand in the centre of the cabinet as you have been shown. If any item of clothing is worn in the cabinet, it should be used for the duration of your treatment, therefore ensuring that the same item of clothing is always worn. It is important that you develop a routine in the cabinet, and always repeat it when you come in for treatment. Changing your pattern of behaviour in the cabinet may lead to a burn if previously unexposed skin is subsequently exposed.

Extra Precautions to be taken whilst having tablet PUVA

You should wear protective sunglasses as soon as you take the psoralen tablets, and for at least 12 hours afterwards.

After you have taken the tablets, you should avoid exposure of your skin to sunlight (including light through window glass) as your skin is photosensitised for at least 12 hours and may burn if exposed.

On bright days cover all exposed areas of your skin by wearing long sleeves, sunhats, sun block, gloves etc.

Extra precautions to take whilst having topical PUVA

Care must be taken with topical PUVA solution. Avoid contact with the eyes. Wear the protective goggles provided.

After application of the sensitiser, your skin is photosensitive for at least 6 hours. It is therefore important that you avoid both natural and artificial UV light for at least 6 hours until the photosensitising effects of the psoralen has worn off. Ensure that all areas of your body, which might be exposed to UV light, are covered up with suitable clothing.

Possible side effects of PUVA

Most people who have PUVA treatment suffer no side effects, but if side effects do occur they are usually mild and virtually never permanent. Most side effects can be treated with creams or will disappear of their own accord in a few days.

Some of the side effects that can occur are: -

Your skin may become red, similar to the redness caused by sunburn. Occasionally the dose of light that you receive will exceed your skin's tolerance and you may develop a more prolonged redness, i.e. a burn. Rarely blistering of the skin may occur. If this happens, treatment will be suspended until the skin settles down again. We may prescribe an alternative treatment to alleviate the symptoms of a burn.

You may develop a tan on exposed skin sites.

Long-term use of PUVA may accelerate the ageing process of the skin, and also increase the chance of certain skin cancers in later life. If you have accumulated 200 treatments during your lifetime then the risks and benefits of the treatment will be re-assessed and you may be asked to attend for an annual skin cancer check.

Cold sores can develop on the lips during treatment if the face is exposed to the UV light. If you are prone to developing cold sores inform the phototherapist who will advise the use of a face visor or a sunscreen cream will be applied to your lips before you go in the cabinet.

There will be an increased tendency for your skin to be dry following PUVA. It is recommended that you use a moisturiser frequently during your PUVA course.

Nausea can occasionally be a problem for patients who take psoralen tablets. If so, let the phototherapist know so that your medication can be altered.

Some patients experience a prickling sensation of the skin following PUVA. This can occur even on non-treatment days and may even be severe enough to discontinue treatment.

How to contact us:

The telephone number of the St Woolos Phototherapy Unit is: 01633 234963 and the Ysbwty Ystrad Fawr (YYF) unit is: 01443 802368, both during working hours.

The Psoriasis Direct number is: 01633 656362

Any urgent enquiries can be dealt with by telephoning the Dermatology Ward on: 01633 234646.

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