Phototherapy

Building healthier lives

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What is phototherapy?

Phototherapy is the use of ultraviolet (UV) light to treat medical conditions. The most common forms of phototherapy used are narrowband UVB and PUVA (psoralen, a chemical that increases the effect of light on the skin, and UVA).

How does phototherapy work?

UV light reduces inflammation in the skin and can help in various skin disorders such as psoriasis, eczema, generalized itching and polymorphic light eruption.

What does phototherapy involve?

Phototherapy treatments are given in a walk-in cabinet 2 or 3 times per week. The average course lasts 20-30 treatments. The duration of each treatment starts at less than one minute and gradually increases up to ten minutes.

A visor or face shield may be worn if your face is not affected by your skin condition. Otherwise, all of your skin will be exposed to UV light except your eyes (protected by goggles) and male genitalia (covered).

If you are having PUVA (psoralen + UVA) treatment, you may need to take the psoralen as a tablet 2 hours prior to each treatment session or apply it directly onto your skin. You will need to wear glasses that block both UVA and UVB for 24 hours from the time the psoralen tablet is taken. Please make sure your glasses have been checked (by our nurse or your optician) as failure to do so may result in cataracts and long term eye damage.

What are the potential side effects of phototherapy?

Potential short-term side effects include sunburn, rash, cold sores
and worsening of skin disease. Potential long-term side effects include premature skin ageing and increased risk of skin cancer. Psoralen tablets may cause nausea.

What do I need to avoid whilst having phototherapy?

- Medicines (including over the counter preparations such as St John’s wort) that make you more sensitive to UV light. Please inform our staff of any new medicines you might be taking during phototherapy
- Additional sun exposure and/or sunbed use should be avoided before and during phototherapy
- Excessive foods that make you more sensitive to UV light such as celery, carrots, citrus fruits, figs, parsnips, parsley and bergamot (present in earl grey tea)
- Haircuts, as they may result in burning of previously covered skin
- Perfumes, deodorants or aftershaves just before phototherapy as they may contain substances that sensitize the skin to light
- Creams, ointments or lotions just before phototherapy other than those directed by phototherapy staff may be used.

What reasons might prevent you having phototherapy?

- Unable to attend regularly for treatment
- Unable to stand unaided for up to ten minutes
- Previous skin cancer
- Skin conditions that are made worse by sunlight such as lupus erythematosus or xeroderma pigmentosum
- Taking medicines that suppresses your immune system (eg. ciclosporin or methotrexate) or make you very sensitive to sunlight
Pregnancy should be avoided during PUVA with the use of effective contraception. If you suspect you might be pregnant during PUVA, please let the phototherapy nurse know immediately. PUVA may be unsuitable in those with severe liver or kidney disease.

Where can I get more information?
British Association of Dermatologists
(http://www.bad.org.uk/site/1223/Default.aspx)
DermNet NZ
(http://www.dermnetnz.org/procedures/phototherapy.html)

How do I contact phototherapy staff?
Dermatology outpatients 0121 371 5469
Phototherapy desk 0121 371 5465
Phototherapy e-mail: phototherapy@uhb.nhs.uk
(Availability: 0800-1300h Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays; Closed on Thursdays, weekends and bank holidays).

The Trust provides free monthly health talks on a variety of medical conditions and treatments. For more information visit www.uhb.nhs.uk/health-talks.htm or call 0121 371 4323.