
Phototherapy

Useful telephone number

Central Appointments

6294-4050

■ Phototherapy

Phototherapy or light therapy refers to the use of ultraviolet (UV) light to treat medical conditions. Natural sunlight has been known to be beneficial in certain skin disorders for thousands of years. It consists mainly of visible light, ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B (UVA and UVB) light. Phototherapy reproduces the action of sunlight in a scientific and controlled manner.

■ Types of phototherapy

There are 3 main types of phototherapy:

1. Narrowband UVB (NBUVB) in which just a small part of the UVB spectrum is used.
2. Broadband UVB employs the full UVB spectrum.
3. UVA phototherapy uses light in the UVA spectrum. This is usually combined with an oral or topical psoralen (a chemical that increases the effect of UVA on the skin) (PUVA).

■ How does phototherapy work?

Ultraviolet light reduces and suppresses skin inflammation and restores the balance of the skin immune system. As a result, the thickening of skin cells is reduced. This treatment can cause skin conditions to improve or clear. However, the effect is usually temporary and not a cure.

■ What conditions can be treated with phototherapy?

UVB is used to treat common skin conditions such as psoriasis, atopic eczema, vitiligo and other forms of dermatitis.

■ What does phototherapy involve?

UV treatments are usually given in a hospital outpatient department in a walk-in cabinet containing fluorescent light bulbs. Treatment is normally given two to three times a week at the beginning. An average course comprises 15 to 30 treatments.

Multiple treatment sessions are required before any improvement of the skin condition is visible. Once the skin lesions have cleared, periodic treatment (1x per week to 1x per fortnight) may be continued to maintain clearance.

The amount of skin exposed to the UVL will depend on the extent of your condition; patients will be required to wear UV protective goggles and hood; and for male patients the genitalia should also be covered. It is important to cover the same area for each treatment to prevent burning.

■ What are the potential side effects of phototherapy?

The short-term side effects include:

- Redness and sunburn
- Dry, peeling and itchy skin
- Blisters

Potential long-term side effects include:

- Premature skin ageing
- Skin cancer (the risk of skin cancer is related to your total lifetime exposure to UVL, and other factors such as how easily you burn in the sun; the risk is higher with repeated courses of UVB and PUVA).

■ Do I need to avoid anything whilst having phototherapy?

- Certain medications including herbal preparations. (Please inform your doctor or nurse if you are taking or have been prescribed any new medications or herbal preparations)
- Additional sun exposure
- Perfume products