

Photodynamic therapy

A patient's guide



Whittington Health
Magdala Avenue
London
N19 5NF

Phone: 020 7272 3070

Date published: 09/11/2012


Review date: 09/12/2014

Ref: Der/Pht/1/

©Whittington Health

Please recycle



.... caring for you 

What is photodynamic therapy (PDT)?

Photodynamic therapy is a new and highly successful method of treating localised skin cancers or pre-cancers. The treatment consists of applying a special cream (containing a natural ingredient, five-aminolaevulinic acid, (ALA) to the affected area cancer and three to six hours later shining a pure red light on it. The light is weak and harmless, and the cream is also harmless. Only where the two are combined will they treat the abnormal area of your skin.

Why is PDT better than other treatments?

We have carefully considered all the other treatment options for your skin condition. There are many factors that we have to take into account. The most important benefits are:

- healing is usually very rapid since there is only slight damage to the healthy cells.
- healing with PDT is usually excellent, and the treatment can be repeated if necessary with no reduction in efficiency.
- the cosmetic result is very good with no scarring.
- having this treatment does not prevent you from receiving any of the other treatment options in the future.

Are there any drawbacks to photodynamic therapy?

There are no long term side-effects from the treatment, but there are a few minor drawbacks:

- we need to leave the cream on for a full three hours (the time depends on the condition being treated) to allow it to soak in deeply.

- we expect the complete healing process under the crust (if there is one) to take just a few weeks.

Will I need to come again?

If your cancer was very thin, we will send you an appointment for about four - six weeks time at the out-patient department. At this follow-up visit:

- please be on time
- you will see a doctor or the cancer nurse specialist (CNS) who will examine the treated area
- if all is well, we will need to see you again in six months time to make sure that the cancer has not come back. If we find the cancer is beginning to come back we can give you a further PDT treatment.

If your cancer was thick, we will send you an appointment to come for another treatment in about one month's time.

Contacting the hospital

If you would like any advice from the dermatological team, you can contact the dermatological nurse on:

Telephone: 020 7288 5062 or mobile 07827 622 065

- during this time, you can stay at the hospital and eat as normal. However, if you prefer you can return home and come back to the hospital later.
- there may be a slight discomfort during and after the treatment. We can give an injection of local anaesthetic to numb the area just before treatment if necessary.
- if your skin cancer is very thick and penetrating deeply into the normal tissues, you may need a second treatment a month later. Very occasionally, a third treatment may also be required depending your specific case.

What will happen to me when I attend for my treatment?

Cream application [morning]

It is important that you arrive at the hospital as near to 8.00am as possible.

- we will remove any crusts overlying the affected area, otherwise the cream will not be able to penetrate into it
- you may have been given a hydrocolloid patch (eg Granuflex) to apply a few days before the treatment day to help reduce crusting. If so, this will now be removed
- we will then apply the special photosensitising cream and place a dressing over this to keep ordinary light out. It is essential that you do not disturb or press on this dressing in case the cream becomes displaced or squeezed from the treatment area

- we will give you a time to return to the treatment room in the afternoon. We need to leave the cream on for a full three hours normally (the time depends on the condition being treated). This allows the cream to soak in as deeply as possible. During this time, you may stay at the hospital and have lunch as normal. If it is more convenient you may return home, have lunch and come back to the hospital later

Light application [three hours later – afternoon]

When you return, we will ask you to sit or lie down, whichever is more comfortable.

- we will take off the dressing and remove the cream remaining on the surface of the cancer
- we may give you, if necessary, a local anaesthetic to numb the skin
- we will shine a pure red light into the skin. This is a weak light and will have no effect on you except just where the cream has been applied
- if the treatment is near the eyes, they will be shielded from the light. We want you to be as comfortable as possible as it is important that you do not move during the treatment
- the light part of the treatment takes from ten minutes or more, to ensure the healing of the skin is as good as possible. There may be a tingling feeling during the treatment.

- This tells us that the therapy is working, but if it becomes too uncomfortable let us know and we can relieve this for you with local anaesthetic at the end of the treatment if necessary we will put soothing 1percent Hydrocortisone cream onto the treated area and then a dressing. We will give you the rest of cream for use at home if needed, and some Flamazine cream

What do I do when I return home?

- you must keep the dressing on at least until the following evening (say for 24-36 hours). This is to protect the site and to avoid daylight getting to the treated area. After this time it can then be removed
- there should be no pain, but if the treated area is uncomfortable, you may lift a corner of the dressing and apply more Hydrocortisone cream and then re-cover it with the dressing. Usually discomfort, if any, occurs only in the first few hours to a day
- after the dressing has been removed, the treated area will probably crust over. This is normal and healing takes place under this crust. It is important not to disturb or pick it since the crust will naturally fall off when the area underneath has healed in a few weeks
- in some cases, the treated area may appear pink, swell or ooze slightly. These are also normal and just signify a stronger treatment action. This will normally settle down within a day
- after the first 24 hours, you can wash, bathe or shower as usual. Do not rub the treated area, but gently dab it dry. It is best to avoid swimming until the area is finally healed