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PATIENT INFORMATION

Photodynamic Therapy (PDT) For Skin Cancers

Photodynamic therapy or PDT is a relatively new type of treatment for some types of skin cancer. A cream containing a drug (ALA) is applied to the cancer and surrounding skin, making the cells sensitive to light. When the area to be treated is exposed to laser light, the cells die off.

The National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence ([NICE](#)) has issued guidance on PDT for skin cancers. There is good evidence for its use as treatment for some types of skin cancer, including superficial basal cell carcinoma, Bowen's disease and actinic keratosis (also known as solar keratosis). This form of treatment is not recommended for squamous cell carcinoma.

PDT offers an alternative option to surgery and radiotherapy. It is best for large skin cancers that are not too deep or where there are several cancers in an area. PDT is not suitable for deeper skin cancers because the light cannot penetrate far enough into the skin. The cosmetic results are usually excellent with no scarring, but occasionally there is some permanent loss of skin colour.

Dr Ratnavel has treated patients successfully with PDT for the past 10 years. Treatment involves day case hospital admission and application of ALA cream under occlusion for 4-6 hours. The light treatment takes 20-40 minutes and involves use of local anaesthetic (a quick injection into the skin) and sometimes a pain-relieving gel dressing. Patients are required to wear dark glasses during treatment and keep the treated area away from sunlight and intense artificial light for 36 hours.

There may be some minor discomfort post treatment which can be managed with a mild steroid cream and simple pain-killers. The vast majority of patients respond to a single treatment but on occasion a second treatment of either further PDT, cryotherapy (liquid nitrogen) or an anti-cancer cream may be required. There is a small failure rate (relapse) of around 2%.

PDT performed by Dr Ratnavel is recognized for reimbursement by UK health insurance schemes (Procedure code S0940 or S0606).