

Department of Dermatology, Churchill Hospital

# Patch testing

## Information for patients



## Patch testing

You have been booked to have a patch test. This leaflet has been written to give you more information about the test and what's involved.

## What is patch testing?

Patch testing can help your doctor to find out whether your skin condition is caused by an allergy to substances that come into contact with your skin – either at home, at work, or during leisure activities. Tiny amounts of substances that may be causing your problem will be applied to your skin to see if there is any reaction. It is not possible to detect food allergies by patch testing.

## What substances will I be tested for?

We will test you for approximately 40 standard substances that commonly come into contact with the skin, such as rubber chemicals, metals, perfumes and plants. We may also test you for other substances, depending on your skin problem, and can include some of your own products that you use at home or at work.

## What does patch testing involve?

You will need to come to the hospital three times. On the first visit (Monday) you will talk with the dermatologist who will decide which tests are needed. The substances to be tested come in small containers, which will be taped to your back. Each of these sites will be marked with ink, so that we know what substance they contain.

The container will need to remain in place until your next visit (Wednesday), when it is removed by the dermatologist. We will then note any reactions that you might have had to the substances. We may ask you to remove the tape a couple of hours before you come for this appointment. This allows your skin to settle down and helps with the reading of the patch tests. If we ask you to do this, you can throw away the tape and containers at home.

Further patches may be added at your Wednesday visit. On the third visit (Friday) the dermatologist will examine your back and discuss any reactions with you.

The sites may itch. This is normal.

### **Photo-patch testing**

We may need to carry out photo-patch testing if we suspect that you have a light-induced contact allergy (if your rash is only on areas of your skin that are normally exposed to light, such as your face, neck, hands).

Two identical sets of substances will be put on your skin as described above. One set is then exposed to some ultraviolet light on Wednesday. Your skin will be examined in the usual way (after two and four days). This may identify skin reactions to a substance only when it is exposed to light.

If you need photo-patch testing, please expect to spend longer than normal in the department on Wednesday (30 to 45 minutes). **If you undergo photo-patch testing, do not remove any of the tape as this will expose your skin to the light too early and will affect the results.**

## Preparing for your patch test

We prefer not to patch test if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, so please let us know before your appointment if you are or could be pregnant.

It is very important that you haven't used steroid creams on your back for at least three days before the patch testing appointment, because this might affect the results. Do not moisturise your back or have a bath with oil in it before coming to the clinic, as this might make the patches difficult to apply. You can continue to use your normal eczema cream on other parts of your body during the week of testing.

If you have extensive eczema on your back, have had sun exposure or used a sun bed during the previous two weeks, please phone to rearrange your appointment. We cannot test a tanned back or skin which is still affected by extensive eczema. Please let us know if you are taking prednisolone (steroid) tablets before your visit, so that we can give you advice on taking this medication before the test.

Tel: **01865 228 266**

The tests are sometimes a little messy, so please do not wear your best clothes.

## What do I need to bring to my patch test appointment?

- Samples of ointments or creams that you have used, including ones bought over-the-counter (non-prescription).
- Other items from home or work to which you think you might be allergic, e.g. cosmetics and gloves (in their containers and packaging if possible).

If you are bringing industrial chemicals, please bring the names of the chemical and the manufacturer. Please also bring the

Health and Safety data sheets, which will be available in your place of work.

We will look at the formulation of your products and decide whether we are able to test them. Sometimes it is not necessary to patch test a product, because the ingredients may already be covered by the existing patch tests. Some products may be unsafe or too irritant to test, such as washing powders and some industrial chemicals.

## How do I look after my back whilst the patches are on?

### **Do not:**

- get your back wet during the week of the tests
- wear your best clothes, as the marker ink may stain
- expose your back to the sun during the week of the tests
- apply any creams to the test area during the week of testing
- take part in sport or heavy physical work during the week of the tests.

### **Do:**

- Wear an old bra or T-shirt for the week of the tests and wear a T-shirt or vest when you are sleeping, to protect the patches.
- Reattach a patch if it starts to peel off, stick it in place with medical tape. If a whole patch comes loose, remove it and note the time and date.

## Are there any side effects?

Side effects are rare, but include:

- Skin reddening and itching from positive test results. This usually disappears after a few days.
- Persistent reaction: some positive test reactions (e.g. to gold) may continue for up to a month.
- Flare of eczema: a positive patch test may be accompanied by a flare of existing or previous eczema, both on your back and elsewhere on your body.
- Pigmentary change: an increase or decrease in pigment (the natural colour of your skin) may be seen at the site of patch tests. This can take several months to disappear.
- Infection or scarring: these are rare.
- Allergy: there is a very small risk (about 1 in 500 people) that you may become allergic to one of the substances applied during the patch testing. This may be caused by a substance that you would normally never come into contact with, so it shouldn't cause any problems in the long-term.

## The results

Positive reactions become red and itchy at the test site – this usually happens by the Friday visit, although it can occasionally take longer. If you do develop a late reaction, please contact the clinic:

Tel: **01865 228 266**

Some of the substances can temporarily stain your skin, but this will fade within a few weeks.

If you have a positive test, we will discuss the allergy with you and how to avoid the substance. We will also give you written information on the allergy.

It is possible that all of your patch tests will be negative. This is still helpful because it tells us that a contact allergy is not likely to be the cause of your skin problem.

## Storage of test results

We record your patch test results on a computerised database and use the results for audit in accordance with good medical practice. The anonymous data may be used for research and shared with other centres.

## How to contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Dermatology department.

Tel: **01865 228 266**

(Monday to Friday, 8.00 am to 4 .00pm)

Private patients:

Tel: **01865 228 222**

(Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 4.40pm)

## Further information

You will find further information about patch testing on the following websites:

<http://dermnetnz.org/procedures/patch-tests.html>

[www.netdoctor.co.uk/health\\_advice/examinations/patchtesting.htm](http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/health_advice/examinations/patchtesting.htm)

[www.allergyuk.org/diagnosis--testing-of-allergy/patch-testing](http://www.allergyuk.org/diagnosis--testing-of-allergy/patch-testing)

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **[PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk](mailto:PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk)**

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