

Solar urticaria



Barnes Building
Photobiology Unit
0161 206 4081



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This guide has been written to help answer some of your questions about solar urticaria.

You may have been given this guide because you have been diagnosed with solar urticaria or because we think this might be the cause of your symptoms.

What is solar urticaria?

Urticaria (pronounced *ur-tick-area*) generally is a common skin reaction that can affect about 2 in every 10 people at some time in their lives. Other common names for urticaria are “hives”, “nettle rash” “wheals” and “welts”.

Solar urticaria is a much rarer type of urticaria that is caused by sunlight. Patients with solar urticaria have itchy or burning skin after they have been out in the sun. They may notice pink or red patches which become swollen and look like nettle stings. The patches can be of different shapes and sizes. If the patient comes out of the sun the rash will disappear quite quickly (often within an hour). The skin looks completely normal after the rash has gone.

Who suffers from solar urticaria?

Solar urticaria is more common in women than men. It can start at any age but most people seem to develop it before the age of 40.

What causes solar urticaria?

Everybody's skin contains special immune (allergy) cells called mast cells. These cells make a chemical called histamine. Histamine is involved in lots of the body's allergy reactions. Normally sunlight has no effect on these cells but if someone has solar urticaria sunlight makes the mast cells release their histamine. It is the histamine that makes the skin red, swollen and itchy.

Is solar urticaria serious?

Solar urticaria can be serious if you expose large areas of the body to sunlight (e.g sunbathing). Exposing large areas of your skin to sunlight can make you feel light headed, sick and turn pale. There have been reports of one or two swimmers collapsing because they exposed a large area of their body to sunlight.

Is solar urticaria infectious?

No. There is no risk of other people catching solar urticaria from you.

Does having solar urticaria increase your risk of cancer?

No. Experts think solar urticaria is more like an allergy.

Is solar urticaria hereditary?

No. Experts do not believe solar urticaria is hereditary.

Can solar urticaria be cured?

No treatment will completely get rid of solar urticaria but by careful sun avoidance, use of sunscreens and anti-histamines the rash can be reduced. Sometimes solar urticaria can go away on its own but this does not happen very often.

How will having solar urticaria affect me?

If you have been diagnosed as having solar urticaria you may have to make changes to your lifestyle which can be restrictive. The doctor can prescribe anti-histamine tablets which will help to control the rash but you should also try to:

- Avoid the sun between 11am and 3pm
- Wear protective clothing
- Use a sunscreen that is SPF 30 or above (UVB protection) and has four/five stars (UVA protection). Remember to re-apply the sunscreen often. If you are visible light sensitive you may need special sunscreens
- Learn how much sunlight your skin can tolerate and keep within that limit
- Make sure you introduce your skin to sunlight gradually in the spring

What about other artificial light sources?

Some patients with solar urticaria need to be careful around bright artificial light sources. This can include the blue-ish lights that dentists sometimes shine into your mouth. You should mention to your dentist that you have been diagnosed with solar urticaria.

The lights that some beauticians use when applying artificial fingernails may also set your reaction off.

You should not use a sun bed if you have a sun allergy.

What about vitamin D?

Importantly, in order for people to make enough Vitamin D themselves, they need a certain amount of sun exposure. The sun protection measures needed for people with solar urticaria mean Vitamin D deficiency is a real risk and this does require treatment with supplements if it occurs. Your vitamin D levels can be monitored through blood tests.

How can solar urticaria be treated?

Sunscreens

You will be provided with sunscreens on prescription and these will help prevent the rash developing. Sunscreen should be applied as thickly and evenly as possible and re-applied often.

Anti-histamines

Anti-histamines block the effects of histamine and will help to reduce the rash and itching. It is best to take your anti-histamines regularly as prescribed by your doctor. There are many different types of antihistamine. Some of the older types can cause drowsiness but this is less likely with the newer ones. You may need to try different anti-histamines until you find the ones that suit you best.

Desensitisation or UV treatment

Sometimes the resistance of your skin to the effects of the sun can be increased by ultraviolet light. This is done in a hospital department and will involve visiting the hospital three times a week for about 5 weeks in the spring.

It involves gradually exposing your skin to a little more ultraviolet light every visit to try to build up your skin's resistance. The effects of desensitisation are lost in the winter so you will have to build up your resistance again in the spring.

Hardening or toughening

Some people with solar urticaria may be able to increase the resistance of their skin at home. This involves going outside for short periods in the spring to build up your resistance.

You might find the time is as short as a few minutes at first but you may be able to gradually build this up to longer times. You will have to be careful not to overdo it, but as you understand more about how much light triggers your rash you will be able to judge how long to stay out.

The effects of hardening are lost in the winter so you will have to build up your resistance again in the spring. We have included an example of how you might try to toughen your skin in the spring.

Example

Mrs Smith knows her solar urticaria rash usually appears after going outside for half an hour. Mrs Smith has been toughening her skin in the spring and this is her diary:

Monday

I don't want to expose too much of my skin, just my arms and face so I wore jeans and a t-shirt. I went outside in the sun for 5 minutes. I went back indoors and waited to see if my rash appeared.....thankfully it didn't.

Wednesday

Today I went out in the sun for 10 minutes. I covered myself up after that so I didn't catch any extra sun and waited. My rash still didn't appear.

Friday

I decided to go outside for 20 minutes, and then I went back inside. After half an hour my rash started and I felt itchy.

Saturday

I went back out in the garden for 10 minutes and my rash didn't appear. I will keep trying to go out for 10 minutes so that my skin can get used to it.

Wednesday

I went out in the sun for 10 minutes and still no rash. I will try 20 minutes again on Friday.

Friday

Went out in the sun for 20 minutes....no rash!

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Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust
Stott Lane, Salford,
Manchester, M6 8HD
Telephone 0161 789 7373
www.srft.nhs.uk

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