

Patch testing

Dermatology Department Patient Information Leaflet

Introduction

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about patch testing.

It tells you what a patch test is, what is involved and what the potential side effects are.

What is patch testing?

Patch testing is a specialist procedure carried out by dermatology doctors and dermatology nurses to find out whether your skin condition is caused or aggravated by an allergy to substances which have come into contact with your skin. This is called contact allergy

Substances that cause an allergic reaction are called allergens. They can be found at home, at work or in leisure activities

Patch testing will not test for food allergies.

What are the benefits of the test?

The test helps to identify substances you may be allergic to, so that you can avoid them.

What will be tested?

Substances that are commonly found in various products which come into contact with the skin will be tested. These include substances such as rubber, preservatives, metals, perfumes, plants and lanolin to name a few.

We may also test some of your own products on you. Your dermatologist may ask you to bring these with you for your first patch test appointment.

What does patch testing involve?

Three visits to the hospital are required usually over 5-7 days.

You can continue to take antihistamines if these have already been prescribed for you by a doctor.

First visit

The substances to be tested will be applied to your back in special, small circular containers, held within hypoallergenic surgical tape. An outline of the position of the containers and tape are drawn on your back with a skin marker. If the substances cannot be applied to your back then the upper arms or the thighs may be used. The substances applied will remain in place until your second visit.

If the area where the patch tests will be applied is hairy, we may need to trim the hair using sterile surgical clippers. Do not shave or remove any hair yourself to prepare for the patch test, as this may cause your skin to be red or sore.

You may find that the areas of skin where the patch tests have been applied become itchy but we strongly advise you not to scratch.

Allow up to 1 hour for this first visit.

Please note that some of the substances used and the skin marker may stain the skin – this is normal. The stains will wash off within a couple of days with showering or bathing. We would advise you to wear clothing, that you don't mind becoming stained, just in case such stains do not wash out of clothing.

Second visit

At this visit patch tests containers will be removed, however some of the tape and the marks made with the skin marking pen will need to remain in place. When the patches are removed your skin will be assessed by your Dermatologist or a Dermatology Nurse for any initial positive reactions. If you have had a reaction to any of the substances in the test you will develop a red rash, or sometimes itching where the substance has been in contact with the skin.

Occasionally we may need to remark over the areas where we have already used the skin marker to make sure that the marks are clearly visible for the final assessment.

Third visit

Your Dermatologist will examine your back again, a final time for any reactions that have remained or have appeared since the initial assessment on the second visit. If you have had a reaction to a particular substance, this will be discussed with you by your Dermatologist.

How will I know if I have a reaction?

Positive reactions become red and itchy at the test site. Any reactions should appear by the third visit (final reading). However, very occasionally reactions can take longer to appear and some instances up to two weeks after you have had your patch test applied. If you do develop a late reaction, please contact us.

What if there are no skin reactions?

It is possible to have a negative patch test. This means that substances we applied for your patch test may not be the ones causing your skin problem.

What are the side effects?

These are rare but include:

- **Skin reddening and itching at the application site (a positive test result)** - this usually disappears after a few days. A strongly positive patch test may cause a blister
- **Persistent reaction** - some positive test reactions may remain for up to a month before fading away
- **Flare up of eczema** - a positive patch test may be accompanied by a flare up of existing or previous eczema
- **Pigment change** - an increase or decrease in pigment may be seen at the place where the patches are, which may last for months or rarely (1 in 1,000) be permanent.
- **Infection** - this is rare and would need antibiotic treatment
- **Scarring** - very rare (1 in 10,000).
- **Allergy** - rarely (1 in 5,000 patch tests), you may become allergic to one of the substances applied during patch testing. In practice, this does not appear to cause problems in the long term.

When are patch tests not applied?

You may not be suitable for a patch test if you:

- Are pregnant or breastfeeding, however if thought to be clinically important your Dermatologist may decide for you to have this test
- Have a lot of eczema on your back; we may need to use another site for the test.
- Have a suntan, sun bathed, applied “fake tan”, used a sunbed or had phototherapy six weeks before the test.
- Are taking a moderate or high dose of steroid tablets.

- Are taking immunosuppressive drugs in the form of tablets, medicine or injections, until three months after you have finished these medicines.
- Are taking a Biologic drug and have not stopped the drug six months before the test
- Have used a steroid-based cream or ointment on your back two days before the test

If any of these apply to you please contact us.

How do I care for my patch tests?

Do not:

- Get your back wet while the patch tests are in place (from bathing, swimming or showering). A cool shallow bath works well as long as you avoid getting the patch tests wet. You should also avoid very steamy environments.
- Wear your best or pale-coloured clothing as the marker ink may stain it permanently. Dark clothing is recommended.
- Expose your back to the sun or artificial sunlight (sun lamps).
- Do any sport or heavy physical work during the patch testing, as sweating could cause the patches to fall off.
- Do not apply moisturiser or bath oil to your back until after the patch testing has been completed. For example if you have a bath or shower the night before or the morning of the patch test do not apply anything greasy to your back as the surgical tape we use will use not stick.

Do:

- Do wear an old bra or shirt for the week of the tests and wear a shirt or vest to sleep in to protect the patches. Clothes that open at the front can be easier to take on and off than those which go over your head
- If a patch starts to peel off, tape the edges down using Micropore or ScanPor. If a whole patch comes loose, remove it and note the time and date. Contact the Dermatology Department as soon as possible on 01384 244799 (9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday).

This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 073 0510.

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Ulotka dostępna jest również w dużym druku, wersji audio lub w innym języku. W tym celu zadzwoń pod numer 0800 073 0510.

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Aceasta broșura poate fi pusă la dispoziție tipărită cu caractere mari, versiune audio sau în alte limbi, pentru acest lucru va rugăm sunați la 0800 073 0510.

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