

Phototoxic reaction

Individuals with phototoxic reactions may initially complain of a burning and stinging sensation. Then the redness typically occurs within 24 hours of the exposure to sun in the exposed areas of the body such as the forehead, nose, hands, arms, and lips. In severe cases, the sun protected areas of skin may be also be involved.

The range of skin damage may vary from mild redness to swelling to blister formation (bullae) in more severe cases. The rash from this photosensitivity reaction usually resolves with sloughing off (desquamation) of the affected area within several days.

Symptoms of photoallergic reactions

Individuals with photoallergic reactions may initially complain of itching (pruritus). This is then followed by redness and possibly swelling and eruption of the involved area. Because this is considered an allergic reaction, there may be no symptoms for many days when the drug is taken for the first time. Subsequent exposure to the drug and the sun may cause a more rapid response in 1-2 days.

How is sun sensitivity (photosensitivity) diagnosed?

The diagnosis is mainly made by a thorough history, examination, and review of the medications and duration of exposure to sun. It is important to ask when the medication was started and for how long the symptoms persisted.

There are no diagnostic tests available, although a photo-patch test may be performed. This test is typically performed by a dermatologist (a doctor who specializes in diseases of the skin) by shining light onto different areas of the skin to see how long it will take for the light to cause redness. This test may be useful in evaluating photosensitivity to topical medications causing a photoallergic response. In cases of phototoxicity reactions, this test is generally not useful.

What is the treatment for a photosensitizing drug reaction?

Recognizing and discontinuing the photosensitizing drug is the most important step in treatment. In general, the usual sunburn prevention methods such as the use of sunscreens and avoidance of prolonged exposure to sun are important steps to take. Keeping the area of skin eruption moist and applying wet dressings may help relieve the symptoms. The reaction may last up to a few weeks.

Topical steroid creams may be helpful in treating the redness, and antihistamines are generally helpful in minimizing the itching. In severe cases, a short course (5-7 days) of oral steroids may be given.

Is anyone taking these drugs at risk for developing sunburn?

Not everyone taking any of these drugs will develop photosensitivity reactions. Certain individuals have more susceptibility to these medications than others.