

## Dithranol Short Contact Immunotherapy for Alopecia Areata

### What is Dithranol and Immunotherapy?

Dithranol is a cream based treatment, originally derived from tree bark and more normally used as a licensed treatment for psoriasis. Immunotherapy is a technique to induce the body's immune system and attract it to the skin surface and away from the hair follicles, allowing the hair follicles to recover and to start growing hair again.

### Does it hurt?

The aim of treatment is to produce a mild irritation in the skin that lasts for several hours and up to 24 hours. The skin may become red and a degree of itch is common. If there is no irritation the treatment is unlikely to work.

### What other side effects are there?

Dithranol can stain the skin a brown/purple colour. This is not permanent. It can also stain clothing/towels etc. Dithranol is an irritant and you should avoid contact with the eyes and other skin sites. You should wash your hands after application. Dithranol can make the skin more sensitive to the sun and therefore you should avoid excessive sunlight. Occasionally you can get inflammation of the follicles (folliculitis) and enlargement of the lymph glands, but these are both uncommon.

### How can I minimise irritation and maximise the benefit?

The effects of Dithranol are variable from person to person, so it is best to start with a low concentration and to wash this off the skin after a short period of time. This is referred to as short contact therapy. The length of exposure can be increased weekly **UNTIL** there is a persistent irritation lasting up to 24 hours.

### How do I increase the treatment if I am getting no itch or irritation?

It is suggested that the contact time is slowly increased by 20 mins daily each week until you reach persistent irritation lasting up to 24 hours OR a contact time of 2 hours. At that point the concentration is increased.

Week 1 Dithrocream 0.5% for 20 mins daily and then rinse off  
Week 2 Dithrocream 0.5% for 40 mins daily and then rinse off  
Week 3 Dithrocream 0.5% for 60 mins daily and then rinse off  
Week 4 Dithrocream 0.5% for 80 mins daily and then rinse off  
Week 5 Dithrocream 0.5% for 100 mins daily and then rinse off  
Week 6 Dithrocream 0.5% for 120 mins daily and then rinse off

From week 7, Dithrocream can be increased to 1% but only for 20 mins, with weekly increases in contact time, as above, eg 20 mins for week 1, 40 mins for week 2 and so on.



**What happens if the skin weeps or becomes crusty?**

Weeping would suggest that a form of contact eczema or infection has developed, which is a stronger reaction than that desired. The treatment should be stopped in the first place and the skin allowed to recover. If it is very painful in the surrounding skin, or the crust is very golden in colour, it is possible that a secondary infection has occurred and you should seek medical help.

**How long do I need to use it for and when will I see any benefit?**

Dithranol treatment should be used for a minimum of 3 months to assess whether it will have benefit and even if there is no visible growth at that point, it is advised to persevere for up to 6 months. If you do start to get some regrowth, it is important to continue with the treatment but the frequency of application can be altered under specialist guidance. Not everyone will respond to treatment. If there is no sign of any hair by 6 months, despite appropriate titration and regular use, it is advised that you stop the treatment.

**How effective is treatment?**

Studies looking at patients with very extensive disease have shown a 25% response rate. The response rate in patients with more patchy disease are likely to be considerably higher (up to 40%).

