

Alitretinoin versus phototherapy as the first-line treatment in adults with severe chronic hand eczema: the ALPHA RCT

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Plain language summary

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What was the question?

The main question was which treatment was better at easing symptoms of severe hand eczema after 12 weeks. The two treatments compared were ones used most often by UK dermatologists. The first is a tablet called alitretinoin, which is taken once a day. The second is called ultraviolet therapy, where hands are soaked in a special liquid and placed under ultraviolet light twice a week at a hospital.

What did we do?

We treated 220 patients with alitretinoin and 221 patients with ultraviolet therapy. Patients received treatment for 12 to 24 weeks depending on how well their hand eczema responded. Patients could have different treatments afterwards, and we collected information on their hand eczema symptoms for up to 1 year.

What did we find?

After 12 weeks, severe hand eczema symptoms improved for both groups of patients but improved most for patients who took alitretinoin. However, 1 year after joining the trial, there was no evidence of a difference between alitretinoin and ultraviolet therapy as a first-line treatment.

More patients stopped ultraviolet therapy early compared with patients who received alitretinoin. Different treatments may have been prescribed after the first treatment.

What does this mean?

Alitretinoin provides a convenient, instant relief or a 'quick fix' for patients with severe hand eczema. Alitretinoin is more convenient for lots of people, but it is important to have other options available for people who would prefer not to, or are unable to, take alitretinoin. For example, people who take alitretinoin can experience unwanted side effects, and people who are able to become pregnant must also use contraception.

Long-term control of severe hand eczema is important. Individual discussions on the pros and cons of each treatment for hand eczema symptoms is needed. Providing flexible options to attend ultraviolet therapy appointments could be helpful (e.g. weekend/evenings).

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