



Dermatology Patient Education

Vitiligo

Vitiligo is a condition that causes the skin to lose color. Some people develop a few spots that lighten or turn completely white. Others have more widespread color loss. Vitiligo can develop on any part of the body. Sometimes, it also causes a patch of hair to turn white.

Skin color may return on its own, but that is not common. For many people, however, the color loss can be permanent if not treated.



Multiple areas of vitiligo on the face

WHO GETS VITILIGO?

People of all skin colors get vitiligo. About half develop vitiligo by age 20. Nearly 95 percent develop vitiligo by age 40.

Research shows that about 25 percent of people living with vitiligo have a blood relative who has vitiligo.

Vitiligo is not contagious.

WHAT CAUSES VITILIGO?

Vitiligo develops when cells called melanocytes die. These cells give our skin and hair color.

Scientists do not completely understand why these cells die. The most common type of vitiligo, generalized vitiligo, may be an autoimmune disease. An autoimmune disease develops when the body mistakes a part of itself as foreign. When the body mistakes melanocytes as foreigners, the immune system begins to attack and kill these cells.

HOW IS VITILIGO DIAGNOSED?

A dermatologist diagnoses vitiligo by examining your medical history and skin. Medical tests are sometimes necessary.

If the diagnosis is vitiligo, blood tests may be recommended to look for autoimmune disorders. An eye exam also may be recommended to check for uveitis, an inflammation of part of the eye, which sometimes occurs with vitiligo.

WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF VITILIGO?

Generalized: This is the most common type of vitiligo. The skin usually loses color equally on both sides of the body. Color loss can affect the arms and legs, including the hands, fingertips, and feet, and also around the eyes or mouth. In the beginning, color loss may be rapid. This is often followed by a period of little or no color loss.

Localized: This can be scattered white patches in one area of the body only such as the chest, back, abdomen or one arm or leg.

Segmental: This type causes color loss on one part, or segment, of the skin very often in the location of nerve fibers that pass through that area of the skin. Hair color also may be lost in the involved area. Often, a bit of hair on the head, an eyelash, or eyebrow turns white. Color loss often occurs for a year or two, and then stops.

Acrofacial: Color loss occurs only on the head, hands, and feet.

Universal: Color loss occurs on most of the body.

HOW IS VITILIGO TREATED?

Treatment cannot cure vitiligo, but it can help repigment the skin. Research shows that for people living with vitiligo, an even skin tone can greatly improve both physical and psychological well-being.

The treatment that your dermatologist recommends depends on many factors. Some treatments work best on certain types of vitiligo or certain areas of the body. Your dermatologist also considers how much of your skin is affected, your, age, and general health.

Treatment for vitiligo includes:

Topical treatments: These prescription medicines are applied to your skin at home as directed. These may include a topical corticosteroid, tacrolimus ointment, pimecrolimus cream, or calcipotriol (a vitamin D compound). Topical medications work slowly to return color to the skin.

To return color to the skin more quickly, your dermatologist may combine treatments. For example, your dermatologist may prescribe both a topical corticosteroid and calcipotriol. If you are undergoing NB-UVB light therapy, your dermatologist may also prescribe a topical therapy to be used at home.

These creams and ointments are powerful treatments and your dermatologist will want to monitor your skin very carefully. Be sure to keep all of your appointments.



Vitiligo on the legs

Light therapy: This type of treatment exposes your body to narrowband ultraviolet B (NB-UVB), which can help return color to your face and trunk. This treatment does not work as well to return color to the hands and feet. It requires several visits a week for many months in which you will either stand in a light box or receive more targeted light treatments. This treatment works slowly.

Another light therapy used to treat vitiligo is PUVA. This treatment combines psoralen, a medicine that can be applied to the skin or taken in pill form, with UVA light. Psoralen makes the skin more reactive to light. PUVA can be 75 percent effective in returning color to the skin on the face, trunk, upper arms, and upper legs, but in many instances the response is only partial. The hands and feet tend to respond poorly.

PUVA requires treatments given two to three times a week at a medical center. PUVA treatments should be given under a dermatologist's close supervision due to the potential for serious side effects.

Skin graft: This is a surgical procedure. During a skin graft, healthy skin that has not lost color is removed and placed over skin that has lost color. This treatment can produce excellent results. It tends to be most effective for people who have localized vitiligo.

Depigmentation: This treatment is only an option for patients who have already lost most of their skin color. Depigmentation removes the remaining color from the skin, leaving you with more even-colored skin. To remove the remaining color, you must apply a prescription cream once or twice a day to the skin with color. This must be done for one to two years.

Depigmentation can be an effective way to achieve one skin color. However, because depigmentation is a permanent treatment, you should talk with your dermatologist about the pros and cons of this treatment.



Vitiligo on the hands

HOW IS VITILIGO TREATED IN CHILDREN?

Vitiligo often develops at a young age. Children can be treated, but they have fewer treatment options because the treatments are so strong. Some of the prescription creams and ointments can be used. Light therapy is another option. When NB-UVB light is used in children, the treatment is generally only recommended after 12 years of age. The PUVA light therapy that requires the pill is not recommended for children. Even at that age, the risk and benefits must be carefully considered.

CAN I USE MAKEUP, SELF-TANNER, OR SKIN DYES TO COLOR MY SKIN?

Applying makeup, self-tanner or sky dyes to skin that has lost color provides instant results, making this option appealing. It also avoids possible side effects, but there are drawbacks. Some products require daily application. This can be time-consuming. It also can take practice to get natural-looking results.

Many camouflage makeups, self-tanners, and dyes are available. Your dermatologist can recommend products to conceal vitiligo.

If you opt to use a self-tanner, it is important to know that some contain a chemical called dihydroxyacetone. This chemical can effectively color the skin, but it also interferes with some medicines used to treat vitiligo. If you use a self-tanner and decide to see a dermatologist for treatment, be sure to tell the dermatologist that you are using a self-tanner.

Parents of children with vitiligo should discuss these options with their dermatologist.

HOW DO I PROTECT MY SKIN FROM THE SUN?

Skin that has lost color sunburns very easily. A sunburn can make vitiligo worse. Therefore, if you have vitiligo, it is important to use sun protection.

Applying sunscreen every day helps to protect the skin. You should apply sunscreen to all skin that will not be covered by clothing. Generously apply a broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of 30 or higher to all exposed skin. "Broad-spectrum" provides protection from both UVA and UVB rays.

For sunscreen to protect your skin, it needs to be applied 15 minutes before going outside and reapplied every two hours, especially if you have been swimming or sweating.

In addition to applying sunscreen, you should also:

- Seek shade. The sun's rays are strongest between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. If your shadow appears to be shorter than you are, seek shade.
- Wear protective clothing, such as a long-sleeved shirt, pants, a wide-brimmed hat, and sunglasses, where possible.

WHO IS STUDYING VITILIGO AND ITS CAUSES?

Dermatologists and researchers around the world are studying vitiligo. Some are looking at the role the immune system plays. Others are looking at the genes involved in vitiligo. It is believed that this knowledge will lead to better treatment options. The ultimate goal is to develop a treatment that will permanently stop the skin from losing color.

A dermatologist is a medical doctor who specializes in treating the medical, surgical and cosmetic conditions of the skin, hair and nails. To learn more about vitiligo or to find a dermatologist in your area, visit aad.org or call toll free (888) 462-DERM (3376).

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