

Vitiligo

Vitiligo is a condition in which the skin loses its color or pigmentation and becomes pale or white.

Vitiligo can develop at any time, but usually appears before age 30 years. It affects men and women equally. Vitiligo occurs in people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, races, and ethnicities, but is more noticeable in people with skin of color. Vitiligo is not contagious or life threatening, but it can be life altering, leading to increased psychological stress or low self-esteem.

Causes

Vitiligo occurs when the body's immune system attacks the skin cells that produce melanin, the body's natural pigment. It is unclear why this autoimmune condition occurs. Development of vitiligo may also be associated with family history or a trigger event, such as stress, trauma to the skin (like pressure or burns), chemical exposures, or use of certain medications.

Symptoms

Vitiligo can affect the skin anywhere on the body. The areas that lose pigment have sharp borders and are surrounded by normal-appearing skin. Vitiligo may also affect the eyes, hair (gray or white hair), and lips. Some people may have a few areas of vitiligo on their body, while others have more widespread loss of pigment.

Diagnosis and Testing

Diagnosis is usually made by physical examination alone. A dermatologist may use a handheld device that emits ultraviolet light (Wood lamp) to get a better look at the skin. A skin biopsy is not usually necessary to make a diagnosis.

Some autoimmune diseases are seen more frequently in patients with vitiligo, especially autoimmune thyroid disease. Your physician may want to run tests to screen for these conditions.

Treatment

Treatment of vitiligo is based on many factors, including severity, how quickly it is spreading, and personal preferences. Topical creams and ointments, in addition to oral medications that lower the immune system, can be used. Light-based therapy (phototherapy) uses medical-grade light machines or handheld devices to treat vitiligo. Phototherapy may slow the disease progression and help repigment the skin in some patients. It can take many months to see results, and certain parts of the body, like the hands and feet, are especially difficult to treat. In recent years, grafting (transferring skin or cells from normal skin to the area of vitiligo) has emerged as a safe and effective treatment option, and is available at some special centers. Often, a combination of these treatments is used.

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Vitiligo is a condition in which the skin loses its color or pigmentation and becomes pale or white. It can occur on any part of the body, including the hair and eyes. Vitiligo can affect people of all skin colors, but it is more noticeable in people with darker skin.



Vitiligo is not contagious or life threatening, but it can be life altering. Several treatments are available, as well as community and online support.

Camouflage techniques (like makeup and sunless tanning products) can be used along with or instead of treatment. Sun avoidance and proper sunscreen use are essential in patients with vitiligo. These practices protect depigmented skin from burning and minimize the contrast between pigmented and nonpigmented skin that may appear more noticeable after tanning.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Global Vitiligo Foundation
<https://globalvitiligofoundation.org/>

The Vitiligo Society
<https://vitiligosociety.org/>

The Vitiligo Research Foundation
<https://vrfoundation.org/>

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