

VITILIGO

What is vitiligo?

Vitiligo is white spots on the skin which can be on different areas of the body. 1% of the population has this. About 30% of patients have someone else in the family with vitiligo. The white spots can be first noticed in childhood or adulthood. The most common areas include the top portion of the hands, the skin around the eyes, the mouth and the genital area. Other areas involved include body folds and areas where the skin can get bumped, such as the elbows, knees and shins. Usually the white spots get bigger over time if they are not treated. It is almost impossible to predict where and if patients get more white spots. However, some patients get a bit of colour coming back over time, even without treatment.



What causes vitiligo?

Pigment-producing cells are partially or completely destroyed in vitiligo. We think this happens because the body attacks its own pigment cells in the skin and hair by mistake. Vitiligo is sometimes seen with other autoimmune disorders such as thyroid disease, anemia, and diabetes. Most patients are healthy, and we do not usually test for other disease unless the medical history or examination suggests that there are other parts of the body that are affected.

What can be done to make the colour come back?

The most common treatment in children is either an ointment called clobetasol (which is usually used twice a day for 2 months and then stopped for 2 months before re-starting the cycle again) or an ointment called tacrolimus (Protopic) (which is used continuously twice a day).



In older children, ultraviolet light called UVB can be used. This involves going to an office or hospital with a 'light box' two or three times a week for about 3 months. Sunlight or artificial light can be used for this purpose.

Lesions can be hidden by cosmetic makeup or cosmetic camouflages such as Dermablend or Covermark. These products can be obtained at selected department stores.

Skin grafts from normally pigmented skin to the discolored areas have been used in some patients but these treatments are usually reserved for prolonged resistant cases in adults.

Since the loss of pigment makes the skin at higher risk of the damaging effects of the sun it is important that they use sunscreens and protective clothing to protect the skin from the damaging effects of sunlight, especially since vitiligo tends to develop when the skin is irritated or traumatized.

