Emirates Dermatology Society

Vitiligo

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What is vitiligo?

Vitiligo is a common chronic condition which makes the skin, and sometimes the hair, lose their normal pigment (colour) and become very pale, white or light pink

This is because melanocytes, the cells which give the skin its colour, have been damaged.

The extent of skin involvement in vitiligo and the rate of its progression are unpredictable, , varying from single small patches to a total loss of skin colour.

Who can get it?

Vitiligo can affect anyone, regardless of gender, skin color or ethnic background. Approximately 1% of the global population. Vitiligo can develop at any age.

What causes it?

Vitiligo is classified as an autoimmune condition in which the immune system mistakenly attacks the body's own tissues, destroying melanocytes. While the exact causes of vitiligo are still not fully understood, it appears to be influenced by a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

Triggers:

- Hormonal changes in the body, such as those occurring during adolescence.
- Skin damage, for example, from cuts or sunburn.
- Extreme stress.
- Exposure to certain chemicals.

Vitiligo is neither contagious nor life-threatening.

Is vitiligo hereditary?

Yes, Vitiligo has a genetic basis, but less than half of those affected know a family member who also has it.

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What are the symptoms of vitiligo?

- Not itchy or painful.
- Sunlight can cause sunburn on the exposed areas.
- Having vitiligo can impact an individual's mental health, leading to feelings of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.

What does vitiligo look like?

Vitiligo is characterized by irregularly shaped patches of skin that lack normal melanin pigmentation, resulting in very pale, pink, or white areas. These patches are often symmetrical, affecting both sides of the body. In areas where hair grows, the hair may lose its pigment and also appear white.

Non-segmental vitiligo

Segmental vitiligo

Vitiligo

How does the disease progress?

The natural history of vitiligo is unclear.

- Spontaneous remission is uncommon, although it can occur in individuals with limited disease.
- Pigment loss tends to be slowly progressive. Initially, there may be a rapid loss of pigment, which can be followed by a latent period during which the skin remains unchanged, lasting several years.
- In rare cases, the skin may regain its lost color without any treatment.

How do dermatologists diagnose vitiligo?

The diagnosis of vitiligo is typically straightforward and can be made by your general practitioner (GP) or a dermatologist.

Can vitiligo be cured?

There is currently no cure for vitiligo.

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How can vitiligo be treated?

- Sunscreens: It's important to use a sunscreen with a 4 or 5-star UVA rating and an SPF of 30. Additionally, you should follow other sun protection measures, such as wearing appropriate protective clothing and avoiding direct sun exposure whenever possible.
- Covering up: camouflage products in a variety of colors that are water-resistant and less likely to rub off throughout the day or onto clothing.
- Topical steroid creams or ointments:
- Topical nonsteroid medications: Calcineurin inhibitors such as tacrolimus (Protopic) ointment and pimecrolimus (Elidel) cream
- Systemic corticosteroids: Short courses of oral or injectable corticosteroids
- Janus kinase (JAK) inhibitors: Emerging options for vitiligo treatment include JAK inhibitors, such as tofacitinib and ruxolitinib.
- Ultraviolet (UV) light therapy or laser therapy typically requires a prolonged treatment course.
- Superficial skin grafts and autologous melanocyte transfer.
  - For very large or widespread lesions, topical bleaching chemical such as hydroquinone may be used to depigment the normal skin.
- Psychological treatments

Narrow band Ultraviolet B.

Excimer laser