

# Vitiligo

Vitiligo is a skin condition that causes the skin to lose colour, so that lighter patches of skin appear. Patches may appear anywhere and are usually seen on both sides of the body. Some people only have a few patches, while others have more widespread skin colour changes. There is no way to predict how much of your skin will be affected. Vitiligo can affect people of any race or ethnic background. About half of all cases begin before the age of 21.

Vitiligo can also affect other parts of the body where you have pigment. For example, patches of hair may turn white. Some people lose the colour on the inside of the mouth, or even the colour in their eyes.

## What does vitiligo look like?

The main sign of vitiligo is a loss of colour on one or more parts of your body. This is also known as a loss of pigment. The affected areas may appear lighter in colour or become completely white. Some people find that the lighter patches are itchy or painful. The condition may remain unchanged for years or progress and cover larger areas of skin over time. It does not usually disappear, and most people have it for the rest of their lives.

There are two main types of vitiligo: segmental and non-segmental.

Segmental vitiligo (also known as unilateral vitiligo):

- One or a few spots appear on one part of the body, e.g. one leg or arm, or on the face alone.
- Often begins at an early age, worsens over the course of one year and then stops progressing.
- Is associated with some loss of hair colour in 50% of people.

Non-segmental vitiligo (also known as generalised or bilateral vitiligo):

- The most common type of vitiligo.
- Scattered patches are seen on both sides of the body, e.g. both knees or both hands.
- Often begins on hands, feet or around the eyes or mouth.
- May start with a rapid loss of skin colour, which then stops and starts over several years.
- Colour loss tends to become more widespread over time.

A third type is known as universal vitiligo. This leads to a loss of almost all of the body's pigment, but is very rare.

## What causes vitiligo?

Vitiligo develops when certain types of cells (called melanocytes) die. These cells normally provide colour to your skin and hair. The exact cause of vitiligo is unknown. It is thought that non-segmental vitiligo is a type of autoimmune disease, which means that your body's own immune system mistakenly attacks itself. Normally the immune system protects the body against infection and disease. In the case of non-segmental vitiligo, your body's immune system attacks the melanocytes.

Segmental vitiligo seems to have a different cause, and may be linked to changes in the nervous system.

The chance of getting vitiligo is greater if you have another autoimmune disease such as thyroid disease or alopecia areata (a type of hair loss), or if you have a close blood relative who has vitiligo.

## How is vitiligo diagnosed?

Your dermatologist may diagnose vitiligo based on the characteristic pattern of colour loss on the skin. They may also ask you about your family history and may order a blood test to check for thyroid disease or other medical conditions.

## What can I do about vitiligo?

Medical treatment options for vitiligo are on the next page. Other treatment options include applying makeup, self tanning treatments or skin dye to make the lighter areas of skin less noticeable.

Vitiligo is not contagious or life-threatening, but it can be very upsetting and may affect how you feel about yourself. Some people with vitiligo develop low self-esteem or depression. Most people have vitiligo for life, so it's important to learn as much as you can about the condition and talk to other people who have vitiligo to see how they have been coping.

[Continued on next page](#)

# How is vitiligo treated?

Vitiligo cannot be cured, but there are treatments available that may help to restore lost skin colour. It is important to be aware that results of treatment can vary from person to person and may be more successful on one part of the body compared to another. Some people may also decide not to have any treatment. It is important to discuss all the options with your dermatologist.

Medical treatment options include:

- Topical (applied to the skin) creams or ointments to try to improve the skin's pigmentation; these usually work best on small areas of vitiligo, especially the face; may take 4–6 months to see improvements.
- Ultraviolet light treatment combined with a medication called psoralen to try to restore skin colour; works best on larger areas such as the trunk, upper arms and upper legs as well as the face; requires treatment twice per week for approximately one year.
- Skin grafting: transfer of healthy skin to affected areas; may be useful for a small number of people.
- Depigmentation: this is an uncommon treatment involving the removal of the remaining pigment from the skin, leaving all skin completely white; it is done by applying a type of cream to the skin every day; can take several years to complete treatment.