Vitiligo

Whether your skin needs medical, surgical or cosmetic treatment, trust the expert care of a board-certified dermatologist.
Research shows that about 20% of people living with vitiligo have a blood relative who has vitiligo.

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

Scientists do not completely understand why these cells die. We know that vitiligo is not contagious. 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.

DIAGNOSIS
A dermatologist diagnoses vitiligo by examining the patient’s medical history and skin. Medical tests are sometimes necessary. The dermatologist may remove a small amount of the affected skin. This is called a skin biopsy and the skin is numbed before this quick and easy procedure.

If the diagnosis is vitiligo, blood tests may be recommended to look for other 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. The types of vitiligo are:

- 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
  Also called segmental vitiligo, this type causes color loss on one part, or segment, 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.

TREATMENT
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 psychological and physical well-being.

The treatment that a dermatologist recommends depends on many factors. Some treatments work best on certain types of vitiligo or certain areas of the body. A dermatologist also considers how much skin is affected. The patient’s preferences, age, and general health also affect what treatment can be used. Treatment for vitiligo includes:
LIGHT THERAPY
This works slowly. One type, narrowband ultraviolet B (NB-UVB), requires two to three treatment sessions per week for several months. Patients may receive NB-UVB therapy by standing in a light box a few times per week or by getting localized laser treatments. NB-UVB works best on the face and trunk. The hands and feet seem the least likely to respond.

Another light therapy used to treat vitiligo is PUVA. This treatment combines psoralen with UVA light. Psoralen is a medicine that can be applied to the skin or taken in pill form. Psoralen makes the skin more reactive to light. PUVA is up to 75% 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.

TOPICAL TREATMENTS
These topical medicines are applied at home as directed. Medicines that a dermatologist may prescribe include a topical corticosteroid, tacrolimus ointment, pimecrolimus cream, or calcipotriol (a vitamin D compound). Like light therapy, topical medications work slowly to return color to the skin.

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

Patients who apply these creams and ointments must be carefully monitored. Be sure to keep all of your appointments.

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 lost most of their skin color. Depigmentation removes the remaining color from the skin, leaving a person with completely white skin. To remove the remaining color, a patient must apply a prescription cream once or twice a day to
the skin with color. This must be done for one to four years.

Depigmentation can be an effective way to achieve one skin color. Before starting depigmentation, the pros and cons should be carefully weighed. This is a permanent treatment.

TREATING CHILDREN
Vitiligo often develops at a young age. Children can be treated, but they have fewer treatment options. Some of the prescription creams and ointments can be used. Light therapy is another option. When PUVA light therapy requires the psoralen pill, the treatment is generally only recommended after 12 years of age. Even at that age, the risk and benefits must be carefully considered.

MAKEUP, SELF-TANNER, & DYES
Applying one of these 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 help you choose a product that matches your skin tone.

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.

SUN PROTECTION ESSENTIAL
Everyone who has vitiligo can benefit from sun protection. Skin that has lost color sunburns very easily. A sunburn can make vitiligo worse.

For people who have pale skin, avoiding a tan often makes vitiligo less noticeable. This can eliminate the need for treatment.

Applying sunscreen every day helps to protect the skin. You should apply sunscreen to all skin that will not be covered by clothing. Use a sunscreen that offers:

- UV A/UVB protection (label should say “broad spectrum”)
- SPF 30 or higher
- Water resistance

For sunscreen to protect your skin, it needs to be applied 20 minutes before going outside and reapplied every two hours.

VITILIGO RESEARCH
Researchers around the world are studying vitiligo. Some researchers are looking at the role the immune system plays. Other researchers 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 board-certified 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 board-certified dermatologist in your area, visit www.aad.org or call toll free (888) 462-DERM (3376).
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Contact the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), which represents almost all dermatologists in the U.S. and has more than 17,000 members worldwide. Most of the Academy's members are board-certified in dermatology, which means they have completed a three-year residency and passed a rigorous two-part test administered by the American Board of Dermatology.

Visit the Academy's website at www.aad.org, and you can:

- Locate a board-certified dermatologist in your area;
- Read information on a variety of skin conditions;
- Get advice about skin cancer prevention and detection, and other ways to care for your skin; and
- Learn about the latest dermatologic procedures and how to make informed decisions about having those procedures.