

Ask Dr. Mikell

Dr. Oswald Mikell, MD • Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry

American Board of Dermatology | American Board of Cosmetic Surgery | Physician of the Year 2008

Skin Pigment Disorders

If you're dealing with skin that appears lighter or darker than normal - or blotchy and discolored skin you may have a skin pigmentation disorder. People of all races have skin pigmentation disorders. Some disorders, like albinism are very rare. Others, such as age spots, are very common.

Q. What is skin pigmentation disorder?

A. Skin cells give your skin color by making a substance called melanin. These cells can become damaged and cause a number of different conditions. The skin can either become lighter or darker. Here's a brief outline of several conditions:

Hypopigmentation means the body does not produce enough melanin, causing the skin to become lighter than usual. Or the melanin-producing cells have been injured, and cannot produce melanin.

- **Albinism** is characterized by very light skin, white or pale yellow hair, and light blue or gray eyes.
- **Vitiligo** creates smooth white spots on the skin. Like Albinism, Vitiligo is rare and typically strikes people between 10 and 30 years old, and is more evident in people with darker skin.

Hyperpigmentation means the body produces too much melanin, causing skin to become darker than usual. Or the skin becomes thicker and appears darker

- **Lichen Simplex Chronicus** is a skin disorder with severe itching that causes thick, dark patches of skin to develop after the skin is rubbed.
- **Lamellar Ichthyosis** (also called fish scale disease) is an inherited disease that also is characterized by darkened, scaly, dry patches of skin.
- **Melasma** is a dark mask-like discoloration of the face, which may occur during pregnancy, or in people on birth control.
- **Moles, freckles, age spots, and birthmarks** are also Hyperpigmentation.
- **Post-inflammatory Hyperpigmentation** can result after inflammation of the skin.

Q. Does skin pigmentation affect your entire body?

A. Some pigmentation disorders affect just patches of skin, while others can affect your entire body.

Q. What causes this disorder?

A. It can be caused by a number of things including pregnancy, Addison's disease, autoimmune disease, genetics, infections, blisters and burns and sun exposure.

Q. How is skin discoloration treated?

A: Most skin pigmentation disorders do not affect a person's health, only their outward appearance. The treatments vary depending on the diagnosis and can range from prescriptions for photo-sensitizing drugs and ultraviolet light; or antihistamines and topical steroid creams to relieve itching, laser therapy, skin bleaching agents and lightening creams, cosmetic concealers and skin grafting. Your dermatologist may advise staying out of the sun. If a mole or birthmark appears suspicious, your dermatologist may surgically remove it to prevent skin cancer.

Q: Is there anything that can be done for prevention?

A: Yes, wear sun screen!

If you have questions or concerns or want to seek treatment for a Skin Pigment Disorder call Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry (843) 689-5259 (Hilton Head) or (843) 705-0840 (Bluffton / Okatie) to schedule a consultation. Remember, any abnormality of the skin should be looked at by a dermatologist.