

Vitiligo

The Basics

Vitiligo is a rare skin condition which affects about one percent of the population. Cells in the skin called melanocytes are responsible for skin pigmentation; when they are unable to function, skin loses its color, resulting in irregular white patches. Vitiligo is not contagious. No one knows for sure what causes vitiligo, but it appears to be an autoimmune disease linked to both genetic and environmental factors. Though vitiligo is not a life threatening disease, it may cause significant psychological distress to those who suffer from it.

Symptoms & Diagnosis

The symptoms of vitiligo may appear at any age, though most people experience their first symptoms between the ages of ten and thirty. Flat areas of depigmented skin appear, which feel normal to the touch. Some lesions may have areas of hyperpigmentation around the edges. Eyes, ears, and hair may be affected, as well as the mucous membranes which line the mouth, nose, and genital areas. The depigmentation may proceed in spurts, with long periods where the skin does not change. The disease is highly variable, and there is no way to predict how severely an individual will be affected. Occasionally, individuals with vitiligo will regain their natural skin color spontaneously. There are no other physical symptoms, but these areas of skin will be more sensitive to sunlight than other areas of skin. Usually a doctor can diagnose vitiligo with a physical exam.

Genetics

Vitiligo appears to be both polygenetic and multifactorial in origin. In other words, more than one gene influences whether an individual will get the disease, working in combination with other environmental factors. For example, individuals often report their first episode of vitiligo occurred after a bad sunburn or other injury to the skin, or during a very stressful period in their lives. Though vitiligo itself is not directly inherited, the tendency to get vitiligo is. A parent with vitiligo has about a five percent chance of having a child who will someday manifest the disease. Unfortunately, if someone in your family has the disease, there is no way to know for certain if you or your children will ever experience symptoms. People with vitiligo may also be more likely to have other autoimmune diseases, such as hypothyroidism, pernicious anemia, Addison's disease, and alopecia areata, so if you have vitiligo, your doctor may want to check for these conditions.

Subtypes

Vitiligo comes in two subtypes:

--**Nonsegmental vitiligo**, also known as *generalized vitiligo*, accounts for ninety percent of cases of vitiligo. Depigmented areas are usually widely and randomly distributed, though they occur more often in certain areas, like the hands and feet, elbows and knees, and the genitals. It is more highly associated with autoimmune diseases than the other main subtype of vitiligo.

--In **Segmental vitiligo**, affected areas of skin are localized to segmental, band-like regions, often on the face. It affects children more often than nonsegmental vitiligo does. It also progresses more rapidly than nonsegmental vitiligo, though it tends to respond to treatment more readily.

Therapy

There is currently no outright cure for vitiligo, and it often proves difficult to treat. Covering cosmetic creams may be applied, and hair dye used if necessary. A doctor might prescribe corticosteroid creams or topical immunomodulators like the drug tacrolimus. These treatments may help induce repigmentation. Another technique that may help is phototherapy, in which the skin is exposed to ultraviolet light. In some cases patients opt to have skin removed from an unaffected part of their body and grafted to a more visible affected portion. Another option is depigmentation therapy, in which topical drugs are used to lighten the unaffected regions of skin in order to achieve a more similar overall skin tone. Carefully protecting the skin with sunscreen is essential for all individuals with vitiligo. Research on future disease treatments is ongoing.

Support for individuals or family members with vitiligo

- American Vitiligo Research Foundation -- www.avrf.org
- National Vitiligo Foundation -- www.nvfi.org
- VitiligoSupport International -- www.vitiligosupport.org

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