

# Vitiligo

**V**itiligo is a disorder that results in damage to and loss of **melanocytes** (cells within the skin that produce **melanin**, the skin's natural color or **pigment**). This damage results in patches of depigmented skin. The process primarily affects the skin, but may also affect pigmentation of other sites, including the eyes and hair. Vitiligo may be **focal** (occurring in only a few patches), **segmental** (in which the patches occur on one side of the body only), and **generalized** (patches throughout the body). The course of vitiligo varies and some patients may develop only a few patches while others may experience almost total depigmentation. Vitiligo may affect persons of all ages; however, its onset most commonly occurs during young adulthood. The cause of vitiligo is not completely understood; however, it is thought to be an **autoimmune** process (a process by which the body produces an immune response against some of its own cells, in this case melanocytes, resulting in their destruction). The February 9, 2005, issue of *JAMA* includes an article that describes the disorder and discusses available treatments.



Depigmented Patches of Skin Characteristic of Vitiligo

## DIAGNOSIS

In addition to obtaining a complete medical history and performing a physical examination, including a detailed skin examination, your doctor may order blood tests and refer you to a **dermatologist** (a doctor with specialized training in skin disorders). A **skin biopsy** (removal of a small area of the affected skin for testing) may be done to confirm the diagnosis. Because there is evidence that people with vitiligo are at an increased risk for other autoimmune disorders, in particular disorders of the **thyroid gland** (the gland in the neck that produces a hormone that controls many important processes within the body), your doctor may choose to evaluate you periodically for these disorders.

## POSSIBLE TREATMENTS

Treatment may not be necessary in limited cases or when the patches are not a concern for the patient.

- **Topical treatments** are creams or ointments that are applied to affected areas of the skin and block the immune system within these areas, decreasing melanocyte damage.
- **Phototherapy** (the use of ultraviolet light or laser therapies) targets the affected areas with specific wavelengths of light.
- **Surgical therapies**, involving the transplantation of a patch of normal skin or melanocytes grown in culture into an area of depigmentation, may be appropriate for certain kinds of focal vitiligo.
- In many cases, optimal treatment may require a combination of these therapies.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Academy of Dermatology  
202/842-3555  
[www.aad.org](http://www.aad.org)
- National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases  
301/496-8190  
[www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov)
- National Vitiligo Foundation  
903/595-3713  
[www.vitiligofoundation.org](http://www.vitiligofoundation.org)

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