

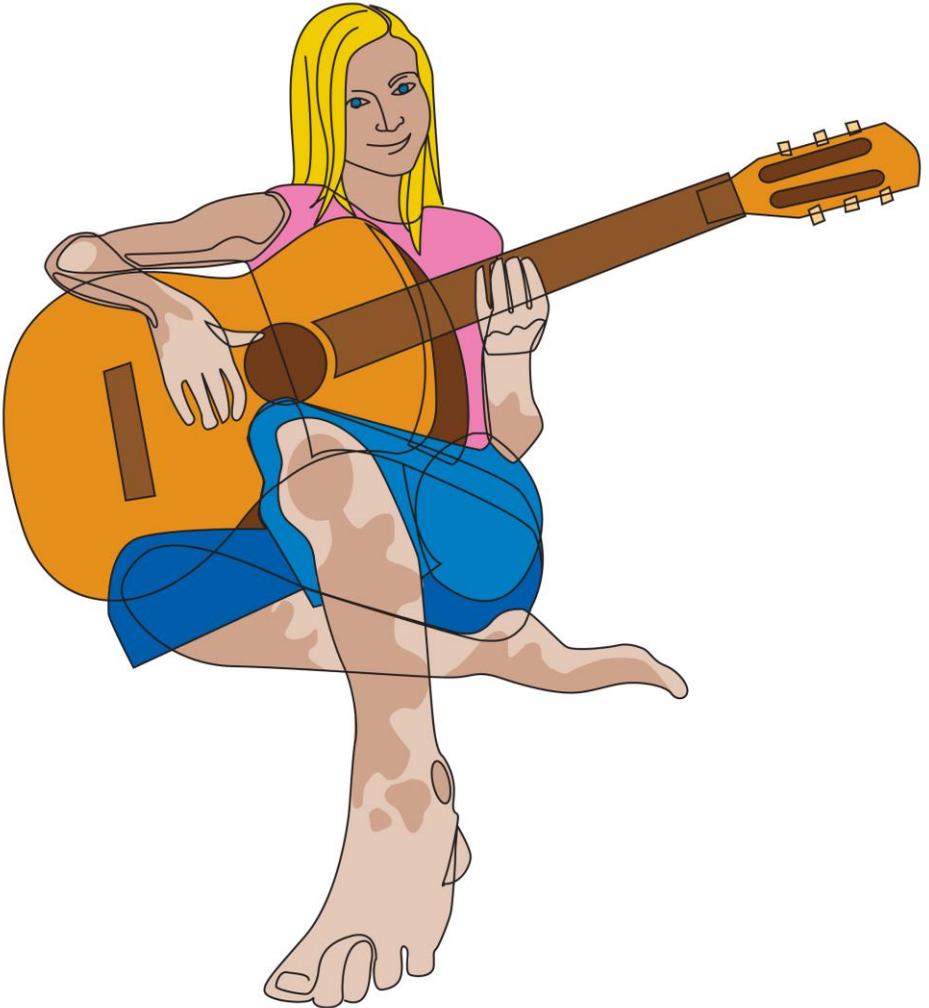


Guide to vitiligo for 12-15 year-olds

This guide helps you understand what vitiligo is and what the causes may be. It will suggest some ways for you to deal with any difficulties you may have. We hope it will also help you with worries or concerns that you may have about having vitiligo.

What is vitiligo?

Vitiligo means having white patches on your skin and sometimes your hair. This is because the cells which give your skin its colour have been damaged.



Can anyone get vitiligo?

Lots of people have it; you are **not** the only one! Anyone can develop vitiligo, whatever their skin colour or ethnic origin. It affects at least one person in every hundred throughout the world, including in the UK. Vitiligo can begin at any age but about 50% of people develop it before the age of twenty.

What causes vitiligo?

Firstly, **you cannot catch vitiligo**. If you have vitiligo, you cannot pass it on to someone else by touching them and it is not infectious.

Scientists and doctors do not fully understand yet the causes of vitiligo. To some extent it seems to be due to the particular genes someone inherits from their parents, but there are also environmental factors. The development of vitiligo may be triggered by such factors as:

- Hormonal changes in the body, for example during adolescence.
- Damage to the skin, for example from a cut or sunburn.

Coping with vitiligo

Firstly, there are three important things to remember:

1 everybody is different. If you think about all the other people you know, they all look different. Apart from identical twins, no two people have the same facial features, height, build and so on. Very often, especially in adolescence, we are critical of our own appearance, wishing that we had blonde hair rather than brown, a smaller nose, fewer spots, etc.

2 media images can be misleading. It is difficult not to be influenced by the media images of 'good looking' models and celebrities who give the impression that looking like them is the only way to feel good. However, remember that often these images are fake, altered to make people look more attractive than they actually are. It is not true either that someone seen as 'beautiful' is necessarily happy. There is a lot of pressure on us to look good. But that doesn't mean that we should all look the same. Everyone is different and that's OK.

3 how you look is only one part of who you are. Your personality is also a big part of you. Remember that the impression you make on other people depends on how well you communicate the real 'you', your interests and capabilities. If you are warm, friendly, interesting and fun to be with, others will 'see' this too, and remember you for it.



Feeling self-conscious?

Being self-conscious, or lacking confidence is something that everyone feels, especially in adolescence. The physical and emotional changes involved in changing from a child to an adult can be very difficult to deal with. People of your age, whoever they are, have concerns about their looks, their identity and what life in the future will be like. So, you are not alone if you are feeling self-conscious.

You can help yourself by trying to:

- Think positively
- Act positively and
- Talk positively.



Thinking positively :

You can:

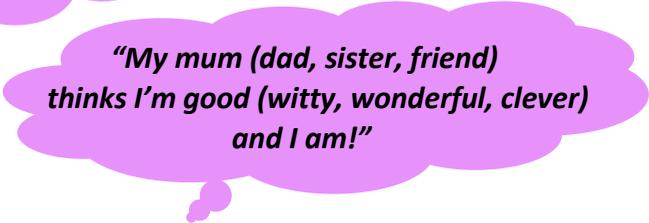
- remind yourself of the 3 points already made: Everyone is different; Media images can be misleading; How you look is only one part of who you are.
- have a **self-motto**. This is a positive statement about yourself which you can repeat in your head when you are in a difficult situation, such as:



*"This is me
and I am proud of it."*



*"I'm OK
and I'll show them
I'm OK."*



*"My mum (dad, sister, friend)
thinks I'm good (witty, wonderful, clever)
and I am!"*

Acting positively:

You can:

- **make your appearance as good as possible.** If you are happy with your clothes, shoes and hairstyle, you will feel more confident and able to act positively. Remember people are not just looking at the vitiligo, they are looking at the rest of you too.
- **be aware of your 'body language'.** We communicate how we feel by how we stand, sit or walk. Slouching shoulders, a droopy head, a flat voice or avoiding eye contact will give other people the impression that you are not OK about your appearance, and maybe are not interested in speaking to them. Having your head up, making eye contact, smiling and having a strong voice gives the message that you are confident, friendly

and worth getting to know. Remember that your body language says a lot about you.

- **ask friends or family members to go with you to places which are difficult or new.** Talking to them shows other people that you're OK and you will have support if you are asked about your vitiligo.

Talking positively:

You can use the following ways of answering questions and talking confidently about vitiligo:

- **Explain** your condition, using words you feel comfortable with, such as:

***"It's called vitiligo;
it causes my skin and/or hair to
turn white in patches"***

***"My skin has
patches of different colour,
that's all."***

You can try the words out on family and friends, to get more confidence. Also, try to keep your explanations short; this will inform people but keep some of your privacy as well. People don't really need to know any more, unless they are a friend and you would like them to know more.

- Reassure other people that vitiligo does not hurt.
- People may be concerned about you, so you could say:

"I'm OK, it doesn't hurt,"

***"It's just a condition
on my skin. Don't worry
- it doesn't hurt me."***

- Reassure them that they cannot catch vitiligo:
To stop the person feeling worried about vitiligo, all you need to say is:

***“It’s called vitiligo,
it’s not catching.”***

- Use humour if you can and keep relaxed. It may be appropriate to say something like:

***“It’s just the way I look.
It makes it easier to spot me in
photographs.”***

If you don’t feel like talking about your condition, or you don’t like the way someone is asking you about vitiligo, you can try:

- **Distracting** people away from your condition by changing the subject.

Ask the other person a question about themselves, or about something you have in common, such as sport, music or films:

***“I’ve got vitiligo,
it’s ok; have you seen the
new xxxxx film?”***

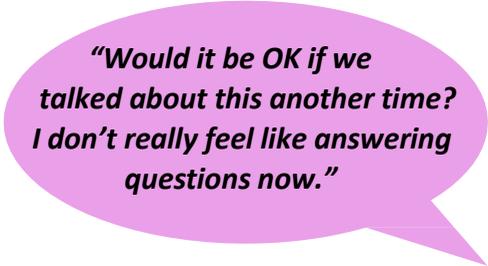
***“It’s just the way
my skin is, hey that’s a really
nice top, where did you
get it?”***

This approach takes the attention away from your skin and allows you to show the other person that there is more to you than just how you look.

- **being assertive:**

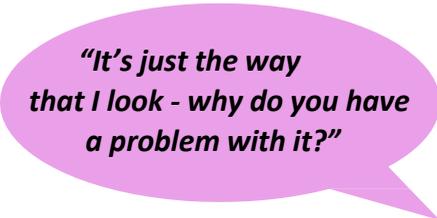
A strong voice and posture (shoulders back, head held up high) and firm words will help you to be assertive without being aggressive or nasty.

You could just say:



“Would it be OK if we talked about this another time? I don't really feel like answering questions now.”

If you feel the other person is being nasty, use assertion to let them know how you feel. You might say:



“It's just the way that I look - why do you have a problem with it?”



“It's none of your business”



“It's a medical condition, what's your excuse?”

(and then walk away).

Think carefully before you use these assertive answers, and try to use them with humour. It stops you taking things to heart and stops things getting too serious.

Dealing with unwanted attention

If you have vitiligo on your face, remember that people may be looking at you for more than one reason. They may be talking to you and looking at the expression on your face, to work out what you are thinking (they may be looking at your body language, in other words). Looking at someone's face is a way of showing that you are listening to them, or it may be a way of communicating an idea to them.

However, people do look more at other people when they are different in some way. Often they are just being curious, maybe because they have not seen vitiligo before.

It is natural if you feel self-conscious in this situation. You may feel nervous, upset or even angry, especially if you are in a place where you cannot move away, such as on a bus or waiting in a queue. You are **not** alone in feeling nervous and self-conscious in this kind of situation.

Remember:

Think positively:

- Try telling yourself **it is ok for people to look**, especially if they are giving you a **smile** at the same time.
- Use your **self motto**.

Act positively:

- **Looking in a friendly way is OK but staring is not.** However, sometimes people stare and they do not even realise they are doing it.
- If you think someone is staring at you, **try giving them a quick smile.** This is a way of letting them know that you have noticed their stare. This will hopefully make them embarrassed and stop them staring at you. Remember they are probably just curious about your condition and are not necessarily being nasty.

Talk positively:

- **Use** the Explaining, Reassuring, Distracting and Being Assertive methods described before.

Dealing with bullying

You may, unfortunately, meet people who are bullies. These people may pick on others who are different in some way - for example, because they wear glasses, or are very short, or do not like football - not only because of having vitiligo. Bullies are often people who feel sad about themselves for some reason. But there is **no excuse** for anybody to make you feel unhappy or upset about your vitiligo, or about anything else.

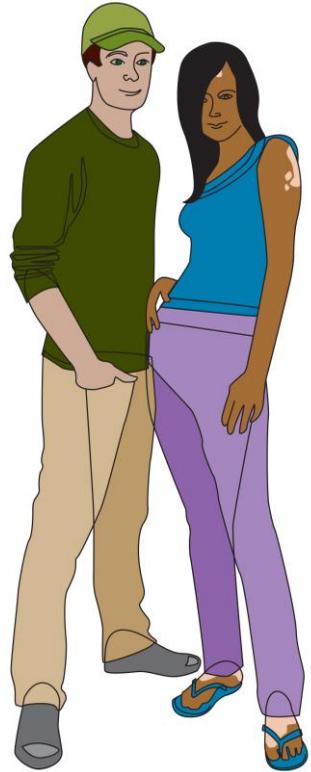
Bullying often happens in school and your school will have a bullying policy to deal with it. If you ever have a problem with someone making you uncomfortable or upset, you need to **tell** a teacher, or another adult. This adult should talk to the person who has made you unhappy, or ask someone else to do this. The bullying should be stopped, for the sake of the bully as well as yourself. Your family will want to know if something has happened at school, so that they can help you too.



What can I do if I am feeling sad or worried?

Everybody feels sad or worried at times. As we are different people, we deal with feelings differently. You may be someone who likes to be on your own when you are feeling sad. However, remember:

- It is usually best to **talk** to someone and share your feelings. This may be a friend, a parent or another adult, for example your teacher.
- Remind yourself that there is **far more to you than the vitiligo**.
- Use a **self-motto**.
- There are **counselling services** if you find it difficult to talk to your friends and family about your feelings. Some people find it easier to talk to someone who is not directly involved in their life. Your school will know about these services.



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