



# What is Vitiligo?

Vitiligo is quite a common condition which makes the skin, and sometimes the hair, turn white in patches. This is because melanocytes, the cells which give the skin its colour, have been damaged.

The way the condition develops varies from one person to another. It can spread to cover the whole body, but this does not necessarily happen. The most common form of vitiligo affects both sides of the body, but it can affect one side only.

## Can anyone GET VITILIGO?

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. Vitiligo is considered to be an 'autoimmune' condition, in which the immune system attacks the body's own tissues.

The causes are not completely understood yet, but they seem to be a mixture of genetic and environmental factors. People with a particular combination of genes are more likely than others to develop vitiligo, but it is not only due to heredity. 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.
- Extreme stress.
- Contact with certain chemicals.



DO **people**  
**with vitiligo**  
PASS IT ON TO THEIR  
**children?**

The tendency to develop vitiligo is inherited, but this does not mean that children will necessarily get it. Children inherit a number of genes from each parent, passed on in a random fashion. These genes can combine in many different ways and only a particular combination will give children the potential to develop vitiligo. Even if they do inherit all the vitiligo genes, it is not inevitable that children will develop the condition. Chance, environmental factors and other factors not yet identified can influence whether vitiligo develops.



**Is there a cure?**

There is, at present, no 100% cure. In some cases, the white patches can regain their colour without the person having any treatment. This is more likely with children. However, it is rare for the condition to go completely.

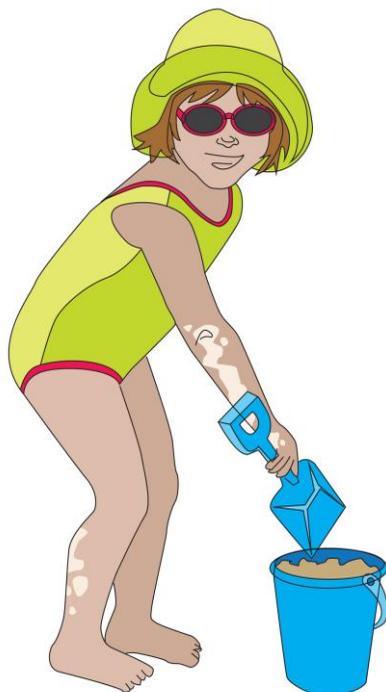
## WHAT ARE **my options** IF I HAVE VITILIGO?

What you do depends on how you feel about your condition. You can:

- Decide that you can live with it as it is.
- Ask your doctor about available treatments.
- Use camouflage products to conceal the white patches.
- Seek counselling or psychological support if you are very distressed.

### **Skin care in hot weather**

Even if you decide to live with your vitiligo as it is, you will probably need to take extra care when your skin is exposed to sunlight. Most people with vitiligo are particularly vulnerable to sunburn. It is therefore important to use sun protection creams or lotions to prevent it. Not only is sunburn painful but it might stimulate the vitiligo to spread in some people. Wearing a sunhat, sunglasses and loose cotton clothes will also help to prevent sunburn, as well as keeping in the shade, particularly at the hottest time of day.



## Treatments

Treatments can be provided by the NHS. They can be very effective in bringing back colour to the white skin patches, or at least slowing down the progress of vitiligo. Generally treatments are most effective when the vitiligo has started recently, but their effects vary from one person to another. The main available treatments are:

- **Creams**, which can be prescribed by your doctor, which are used for up to 2 months or longer under close supervision.
- **Light treatment**, for which you would have to go to hospital 2 or 3 times a week. This is sometimes given with medication as well.



## Camouflage

Vitiligo can make people feel conscious of their appearance, especially if the white patches are on their face. Patches of vitiligo can be hidden by:

- **Camouflage creams**, which can be matched exactly to the person's skin colour. Some of these are available on prescription. Doctors can make a referral to a specialist advice service to help people get the best product and colour for their skin.
- **Fake tans**, which are preferred by some people because they last longer than the camouflage creams. They can also be applied to areas of skin where the camouflage creams may easily rub or wash off. However, fake tans are unlikely to provide a perfect match with the usual skin colour, especially those with very dark skin.

## Psychological support

Having vitiligo can be very stressful, particularly for people who have it on their face and hands. Talking to friends and family members about anxieties and fears may be enough to help cope with the condition. If this does not help, you should go to your doctor to discuss your concerns. You may be referred to a specialist for counselling or psychological support.

## Further Information

If you would like further information about vitiligo, please use our website [www.vitigosociety.org.uk](http://www.vitigosociety.org.uk).

The **Vitiligo Society** is a small, national charity whose main aim is to support people with vitiligo. Support is given through:

- the regularly updated website;
- the newsletter, '*Dispatches*' which keeps members in touch with the latest research, treatments and other members' experiences;
- holding workshops, where people with vitiligo are supported, given the latest information about the condition and have the opportunity to meet other people with vitiligo;
- campaigning for better understanding of vitiligo within the medical profession;
- raising awareness of vitiligo among the general public.

The Society also supports research initiatives and closely monitors new research.



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