



Just diagnosed?

If you have white patches of skin, it is important to go to your doctor for a diagnosis. The commonest type of vitiligo is symmetrical, with the patches often on the hands, on folds of skin at the armpit and groin, and around the body's 'openings' – mouth, eyes and genitals. There are other conditions which can be mistaken for vitiligo, so you need a medical diagnosis to be sure.

Getting the diagnosis

How people feel about having a diagnosis of vitiligo depends on a number of factors – where the patches are on the body, how noticeable they are, the person’s age, family situation and so on. It may be that your vitiligo is not very noticeable; as it does not hurt, possibly you will regard the condition as a nuisance rather than anything else. For others, the diagnosis can come as a shock; often people describe feeling unreal, or a sense of detachment, or time standing still. This is a common response often associated with shock, which offers a protective barrier to otherwise painful emotions. It may mean that you do not take in much information during your consultation.

Everyone has their own way of managing such difficult situations, but when you see the doctor, it may be helpful to:

- **write down questions** before you go. This may help you to feel in control of the consultation and to make sure your concerns are dealt with.
- **have a trusted person with you**, who can help you to make sense of the information afterwards, and be an emotional support.
- **ask for information to take away** with you. You may want to find out more about vitiligo before making any decisions, and
- **arrange another appointment** to discuss treatment options. Do not feel you have to commit yourself to a course of action if you are not ready to do this yet.

The emotional impact of vitiligo

Vitiligo is not a physically ‘harmful’ condition, so you may find that the doctor’s approach is to reassure you that having the condition is not ‘so bad’. You may find this reassurance helpful. However, as suggested before, people have different reactions to hearing that they have vitiligo. You may feel that focusing on the physical aspect of the condition does not take account of the emotional impact vitiligo can have. Having a changed appearance can be very distressing for many people – if this is how you feel, it is an understandable and normal reaction.

You may find it helpful to look at the other eBooks which deal with the emotional impact of vitiligo:

Living with vitiligo - A positive approach

Living with vitiligo - Emotional support

Some questions you may be asking

Why me?

This is an obvious question, especially if you do not have any relatives with vitiligo. Why particular individuals develop the condition and others do not, is not fully understood yet, but a mixture of genetic and environmental factors seems to be involved. People who inherit a particular combination of genes from their parents 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.

Whatever the factors, **it cannot be said that vitiligo is anybody's fault**. It would be completely wrong to blame yourself. Some communities may hold strong beliefs about the cause and meaning of a condition like vitiligo, which may increase your distress. If this is the case for you, it is important to seek support through organisations such as the *Vitiligo Society*, which can give you information about vitiligo and enable you to share experiences with others who have the condition.

How bad WILL IT GET?

Vitiligo is unfortunately unpredictable, so it is difficult to tell how the condition will develop. Not knowing whether, or how much, your vitiligo patches will spread can be distressing. You may find yourself monitoring changes frequently, perhaps even obsessively. While this is a natural response, try not to make yourself more anxious by worrying about what might happen.

What can I do?

- **Inform yourself:** get information about vitiligo. This will help you to make treatment decisions and may give you a better sense of control over your condition.
- **Share experiences with others:** it can be reassuring to know that you are not alone in dealing with vitiligo. As well as giving support, other people can also be a significant source of information.
- **Reduce stress:** are there immediate changes you can make in your life that would decrease stress for you? Do you need more support from family or friends?
- **Talk about your feelings:** this may be with your family and friends. If you find this difficult, a 'neutral person' like a counsellor may be able to help.

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