



## Patches and dots

Although they are often harmless, pigmentary skin disorders affect skin colour and can cause distress and anxiety. Here are the most common ones that affect women.

By Dr Noor Hanif Said, Dermatologist



### Melasma

This disorder mainly occurs in women, resulting in grey-brown patches appearing on sun-exposed areas such as the face, neck and forearms. Usually related to hormone excess, it is so common in pregnancy that it's called the "mask of pregnancy". Some melasmas fade, but most are stubborn and take a long time to improve.

**Treatment:** As chances of recurrence are high, and sun exposure and tanning worsen it, daily and adequate sun protection is crucial. Topical creams containing hydroquinone or a combination of hydroquinone, tretinoin and steroid (Kligman's formula) may also be used. For stubborn cases, intense pulse light (IPL), chemical peels and lasers are options. Lasers should be considered very carefully and performed by an experienced doctor as it may sometimes worsen melasma.

### Hori's Naevus

Hori's nevus is commonly seen in middle-aged Asian women in the form of bluish-grey patches typically on the cheeks. Largely caused by genetics and hormonal activity, melasma and Hori's Naevus can occur simultaneously.

**Treatment:** In most cases, pigmentation penetrates deep into the skin, making treatment challenging. Pigment lasers are used to break down the melanin in the affected areas.

### Solar lentigines

Also known as liver spots, they commonly affect fair-skinned people over 40 with brown, black or grey spots appearing on sun-exposed areas of the skin. These are caused by sun exposure when UV rays speed up melanin production. Solar lentigines can be left alone as they do not turn cancerous, but they may look similar to other more serious skin conditions, so it is important to see a dermatologist, especially if the spots:

- are very dark or in different colours
- increase in size over a short period of time
- have irregular borders
- bleed, itch or turn red

**Treatment:** Ranges from topical creams with skin lightening properties, IPL and pigment laser treatments to chemical peels and light cryotherapy, which uses liquid nitrogen to destroy the melanin.

### Freckles

Freckles are small flat brown marks on sun-exposed areas of the skin. They are more common in fair-skinned people. Caused by sun exposure, freckles may fade, but will reappear when skin is exposed to the sun. As a person ages, freckles generally become less noticeable.

**Treatment:** Reduce and lighten them by avoiding sun exposure and ensuring regular use of sunscreens and skin lightening creams, IPL and pigment laser treatment also work.

### Post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation (PIH)

PIH is a general term for excess pigment formation after an underlying skin condition has healed. It occurs because the body's immune response is activated due to inflammation or injury and causes pigment-producing skin cells to produce more melanin. Discolouration is temporary but may become darker when exposed to sunlight. PIH is more common in darker-skinned people. In most cases, PIH improves over time and normal skin colour will return.

**Treatment:** Hydroquinone and retinoids may be used to lighten PIH, while procedures such as chemical peels, lasers and IPL may be helpful, though they can aggravate pigmentation. For maintenance, regular application of sunblock is a must.

Dr Noor Hanif Said is an accredited dermatologist who believes in providing high quality dermatological care as well as evidence-based treatment for all medical and aesthetic skin conditions.

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