

APPROACH TO THE TREATMENT OF SKIN DISCOLORATION

Skin discoloration is one of the most common yet challenging conditions we are asked to treat. The sun-exposed areas of the face, neck, chest, and hands are affected most often. The discoloration may be tan or brown due to excess pigment, red due to fine blood vessels at the surface of the skin, or a combination thereof. As an example, so-called dark circles under the eyes can be a combination of both pigment and blood vessels accompanied by very thin skin allowing the underlying discoloration to be seen more easily. Additionally, the facial contours in this area are uneven casting shadows making the skin look even darker. There are many possible factors which can contribute and predispose one to discoloration including ethnicity, genetics, skin color and sensitivity, pregnancy and hormones (i.e. melasma), medications, chemical and environmental exposures, skin diseases including rashes, acne, rosacea, injury including traumatic and surgical scars, and lastly the aging process itself. Almost all of the factors contributing to discoloration can be aggravated by ultraviolet light exposure whether it be natural sunlight or artificial tanning light. Most of the conditions we are asked to treat involve too much pigment and are called hyper- (meaning excessive) pigmentation. Too little pigment is called hypopigmentation and most commonly results from injury or scarring. When skin darkens following skin disease or injury, it is referred to as "PIH" (post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation) or when it lightens following similar insults, it is referred to as postinflammatory hypopigmentation. Because of the diverse nature and causes of discoloration, each of the factors responsible needs to be addressed and it is unlikely that any one method of treatment will be universally successful. Furthermore once improvement is obtained it is likely that a maintenance regimen will be required for continued improvement. Our highly trained physicians, aestheticians, and staff evaluate each patient very carefully and critically and will customize a treatment plan specific to your needs and desires.

Suffice it to say that the foundation of all treatment requires the daily use of sunscreen all year round. Granted, there is concern that the lack of sun exposure may contribute to vitamin-D deficiency, but there is clear evidence that 20 minutes of sunlight exposure three times per week on any area of the body (it does not have to be on your face) is adequate. Additionally, if there are other concerns, vitamin-D and calcium supplements are much safer than excessive sunlight exposure.

The following is a broad overview of just some of the treatment options available to improve discoloration based upon cause and effect:

Excessive pigment may appear as melasma, a darkening of the skin of the forehead, cheeks, and upper lip, thought to be a result of pregnancy and/or hormones, age/liver spots known as lentiginos, a result of aging, hereditary factors and excessive sunlight, freckles, post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation, and poikiloderma, a condition exhibiting both a red and tan staining of the skin commonly seen on the sides of the neck and occasionally the chest. Treatment options include:

1. Camouflage makeup, for which you may receive expert advice from our highly trained cosmetic medical and licensed estheticians.
2. Daily zinc oxide/titanium dioxide containing sunblock with SPF30 or greater regardless of season or weather.
3. Bleaching creams (hydroquinone, kojic acid, azelaic acid).
4. Exfoliant (retinoic acids including Retin-A, Renova, Tretinoin, Tazarotene, the alpha-hydroxy acids, glycolic and lactic acid, and the beta acid salicylic acid).

5. Series of microdermabrasions and/or light chemical peels.
6. Series of intense pulsed light (IPL) photorejuvenation treatments.
7. Pigment specific laser treatment (Q-switched ND Yag/Alexandrite).
8. Fraxel laser.

Excessive redness may appear as rosacea, a blushing redness of the forehead, cheeks, and chin, fine blood vessels on the surface of the surface of the skin around the nose, cheeks, and chin, and poikiloderma of the neck and chest. Treatment options include:

1. Camouflage makeup for which you may receive expert advice from our highly trained and licensed cosmetic medical aestheticians and daily zinc oxide/titanium dioxide containing sunblock SPF30 or greater regardless of the season or weather
2. Cosmeceuticals containing botanicals which minimize the appearance of redness.
3. Series of intense pulsed light (IPL) photorejuvenation treatments.
4. Blood vessel and red specific laser (pulsed dye laser).

Some discoloration of the skin such as dark circles under the eyes or a prominent facial feature such as the chin may be partly due to an illusion created when light is reflected and/or absorbed by the skin.

Treatment options include:

1. Camouflage makeup including applying a light color over a darker area to make it look less deep such as under the eyes or applying a darker color to a more prominent feature such as the chin to make it appear less prominent.
2. In the case of depressions in the skin from acne and chickenpox scars and hollow sunken appearing lower eyelids, so called tear trough areas, fillers can be injected under the skin to fill in the depressions and make the skin smoother.

We hope the information provided has given you a better understanding about skin discoloration, causes, and approaches to treatment. There are many available treatment options and we try to choose those which are most appropriate for you. New England Dermatology & Laser Center strives to provide state-of-the-art technology and skin care. We are honored you have chosen us and we will do our very best to meet your expectations.