



Melasma

What is Melasma? Melasma is a skin condition presenting as brown patches on the face of adults. Both sides of the face are usually affected. The most common sites of involvement are the cheeks, bridge of nose, forehead, upper lip and chin.

Melasma mostly occurs in women. Only 10% of those affected are men. People of certain ethnic backgrounds who have darker skin, particularly Hispanics, Asians, Indians, people from the Middle East, and Northern Africa, are more commonly and severely affected.

What causes Melasma? Melasma is due to excessive production of skin pigment known as melanin. The precise cause of melasma is unknown, but may be due to a change in hormonal status. It is commonly associated with pregnancy and called the "mask of pregnancy." Birth control pills may also cause melasma. Some patients note onset around menopause.

Sun exposure contributes to melasma. Ultraviolet light from the sun, and even very strong light from light bulbs can stimulate pigment-producing cells (melanocytes) to produce more pigment, thereby darkening the brown patches. Incidental exposure to the sun is mainly the reason for recurrences of melasma.

How is Melasma treated? While there is no cure for melasma, many treatments have been developed to help reduce the appearance. Melasma may disappear after pregnancy; it may remain for many years, or a lifetime. If onset occurs with birth control pills, discontinuation of the birth control pills may also help.

Sunscreens are essential in the treatment of melasma. They should be broad spectrum, protecting against both UVA and UVB rays from the sun. A SPF 30 or higher should be selected. In addition, physical sunblocks, eg: zinc oxide and titanium oxide, may be used to block ultraviolet radiation and visible light. Sunscreens should be worn daily, whether or not it is sunny outside, or if you are outdoors or indoors. A significant amount of ultraviolet rays is received while walking down the street, driving in cars, sitting next to windows. A broad rimmed hat is also useful for blocking the sun's rays.

Melasma may be treated with bleaching or whitening creams which often contain hydroquinone as the active ingredient. These are available in over-the-counter formulations or your doctor may suggest a prescription strength hydroquinone. This may be used in combination with other

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medications such as tretinoin or azelaic acid. In extensive cases, your doctor may also suggest such treatment programs such as OBAGI, chemical peels or laser.