Vitiligo

SYMPTOMS
The most common symptoms include white patches of skin that itch. It can affect any area of the body, but it mainly affects the extremities, face or neck, and skin folds. It can involve the areas around the lips, genitals, gums, and the colored skin that surrounds the nipple. Vitiligo strikes people between the ages of 10-30 years old, and it is common in females and males alike.

CAUSES
The exact cause of vitiligo is not known. It is an autoimmune disease that is believed to be hereditary. The proposed theories are that stress, thyroid dysfunction, skin injury, severe sunburns, chemicals, and medicines combined with the genetic tendency towards vitiligo can all contribute to the condition. These are theories only.

DIAGNOSIS
Vitiligo is diagnosed with various tests—physical examination, blood tests for autoimmune markers, skin biopsy, and obtaining a medical history of the individual’s family or a combination of these tests.
TREATMENT
There is no standardized treatment for vitiligo. Treatment is usually individualized and can include phototherapy (light therapy), steroids, and various topical ointments. In severe cases of vitiligo, skin grafts have been found to help as well as tattooing the skin in people with dark skin. The skin can also be dyed or artificially tanned although it is difficult to match the dyed or tanned area to the pigmentation of the surrounding or healthy skin.

Other strategies to help manage vitiligo include wearing sunscreen and sun-protecting clothing and avoiding the use of hair dyes and bleaches that can damage the skin.

DEALING WITH VITILIGO
In people with moderate to severe vitiligo, the emotional toll can be enormous especially if it affects the skin on specific parts of the body that are visible, such as the face, arms hands, and legs. Finding a medical provider who is well-versed in treating the physical and emotional issues of vitiligo is essential. Peer support in the form of a support group for discussing the condition and receiving emotional support is critical.

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