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## Pigment disorders

What is melanin?

The brown pigment, melanin, is responsible for our skin types from fair to tan or brown. Injury or diseases of the skin can cause this pigment to become darker or lighter. Sometimes the pigment change is permanent but most of the time the coloration will normalize in a few months after the cause has been removed.

What are some of the disorders of pigmentation?

There are many disorders of skin pigmentation. In some, the causes are known, like melasma, while in others, we are just learning about the cause as in vitiligo.

The most common type of pigment problem is called post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation. "Hyper" means too much pigment is formed. This can happen after the skin is cut, or suffers a burn or abrasion, or following surgery or liquid nitrogen cryotherapy. An example of this is when an acne pimple starts to go away, the skin is left with a brown spot for a few weeks. Other common causes of hyperpigmentation include age spots (sun spots) and freckles.

Ultraviolet light or radiation treatments will cause tanning of the skin. Topically applied substances such as some perfumes, creams or industrial chemicals can lead to darkening of the skin and of course certain drugs taken internally can produce hyperpigmentation.

The skin can also lighten in response to injury, freezing or scraping that damages the melanocytes, the cells that manufacture melanin. This is called hypopigmentation. "Hypo" means too little pigment is formed.

Some skin diseases like eczema or psoriasis can cause a temporary hypopigmentation.

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Is there anything that can be done for hyperpigmentation or hypopigmentation?

A dermatologist should be consulted to help determine the cause of the pigmentary problem and may be able to suggest prescription medications or procedures to help.

Aside from getting control of skin diseases like acne or avoiding the causes of hypo- and hyperpigmentation, the best advice is to wait it out. Application of some over-the-counter creams and lotions may further aggravate the darkening or may produce a skin allergy which will compound the problem.

Avoiding excessive ultraviolet exposure is another measure you can take to minimize hyperpigmentation and further delays in healing. Application of topical Vitamin C serum and Vitamin E lotions have been helpful in some cases. Cosmetic coverups can make you feel better while the pigmentation is resolving.