FOR A SPOTLESS SKIN

Though there are no shortcuts, the problem of hyperpigmentation can be tackled through preventive measures and some basic home remedies by SHARMILA CHAND

Hyperpigmentation is the common problem which is characterised by the formation of brown patches on the skin. It occurs due to an increase in the production and deposition of melanin, the 'colour pigment' produced by cells in the skin, melanocytes. Age spots, liver spots, freckles, sun spots, pregnancy mask are different types of hyperpigmentation.

CAUSES
There are multiple causes for this problem which can vary from hormonal changes—often during pregnancy, to acne or external wounds and unprotected sun exposure.

Exposure to sun: Dark skin patches often occur due to exposure to the sun. These are sometimes called age spots, lentigines or liver spots, and are often seen on the face, hands and shoulders. Most people do not realise that even on cloudy days, with only momentary bouts of sunshine, the UV index can be high and sunburn can occur easily.

Post-acne scars: These often occur in the form of pigmented patches. Experts say, acne is a chronic disorder characterised by inflammatory papules, pustules, pimples, open and closed comedones, cysts and nodules affecting both adolescents and adults. Inflammatory acne lesions can disrupt the epidermal basal layer causing the melanocytes to increase melanin production.

Freckles: Ephelides or freckles are dark spots that are inherited and a stubborn condition difficult to treat.

Melasma or Chloasma: Usually called 'the mask of pregnancy,' this is marked by brown patches on the skin as a result of hormonal changes during pregnancy. According to experts, usually these dark spots disappear on their own after delivery. It is believed that birth control pills can also cause pigmentation.

Dermatitis: Dermatitis may cause skin itching, redness and skin pigmentation.

TREATMENT
Treatment of hyperpigmentation depends on how old are the patches. Newer patches are often easier and faster to get rid of than the old ones that have been on the skin for years. Says Dr Nitin S Walia, Senior Consultant, Dermatology, Max Healthcare, New Delhi, "It is not advisable to indulge in self-therapy through various over-the-counter creams and products, etc." He adds, "There are no shortcuts to cure pigmentation. The affected person may need to take precautions, avoid trigger points, and take facial skin care through right kind of skin products and also medication. He or she may be required to consult both a good dermatologist and a beauty therapist, depending on the problem."

Dr Walia further explains, "Medical specialists usually look for some internal health issues which may have led to skin pigmentation. In some cases, the pigmentation problem may subside over a period of time. For example, in Chloasma, after pregnancy it is likely that the patches or spot may lighten or disappear as enzymes get settled down. Moreover, avoidance of excessive sun exposure also helps in limiting the pigmentation."

A doctor first identifies whether pigmentation is epidermal or dermal. Only epidermal pigmentation responds to treatment. The first step in therapy includes prescription creams to lighten the skin. These contain a combination of hydroquinone, tretinoin, and a class V to VII topical corticosteroid. But, this usually takes a long time. Chemical peeling with glycolic acid or trichloroacetic acid is an option for patients with severe melasma that is unresponsive to external treatment. Certain allergens can also cause hyperpigmentation and pigmentation. Let your doctor conduct a simple test to ascertain the cause and provide solution.

Sun-induced hyperpigmentation can be effectively controlled by making sure the skin is shielded from the direct sun rays. Use umbrella and hat and wear loose fitted clothes. Similarly, drugs causing these problems should also be discontinued in order to get back clean and clear skin. Discontinuation of birth control pills and harmful cosmetics would also result in better skin and clearance of pigmentation.

Home remedies also play an important role in curing this problem. For example, aloe vera heals the pigmented skin and its daily application can bring favourable results. Potato too has skin-lightening qualities and also prevents a host of skin pigmentation problems. Slice one medium-sized potato into two and put a few drops of water on the surface. Rub it on the pigmented area so that the juice of potato acts on the skin. Also, lemon, papaya and cucumber help a lot in treating pigmentation.