

OVERVIEW OF VITILIGO AND ITS MANAGEMENT IN AYURVEDA

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INTRODUCTION

Leukoderma which is also known as Vitiligo is an autoimmune disorder in which the immune system of the body attacks the healthy cells and as a result, it starts affecting the body. In Vitiligo the destruction of melanocytes occurs, which are the cells responsible for determining the colour of skin and hair, resulting in the formation of white spots on the skin. This de-pigmentation could be partial or complete on any part of the body. It can affect people of any age, gender and also has chance to run in family. Most important thing to know about the disease is that it doesn't spread from touch, saliva, inhalation, blood, sexual intercourse or sharing of personal items like bottles, towels etc. In Ayurveda it is known by the name *Shwitra*.

WHAT CAUSES VITILIGO?

It can occur for a variety of reasons but the actual cause is still unknown. It is frequently associated with multiple autoimmune diseases. There are various theories about its pathogenesis and the aetiology is multifactorial. While genetics play an important role, other causes like infection, stress, certain inflammatory diseases, neural causes, exposure to chemical, excessive sun burn and auto-immune diseases can also trigger leukoderma later in life. The most common cause includes traumatic incidents, including burns, accidental cuts, eczema and ulcers resulting in the formation of white patches.

Ayurveda states that basically it is due to the aggravation of Pitta Dosha which leads to cause of de-pigmentation.



EPIDEMIOLOGY

Vitiligo is the commonest cause of depigmentation. It can appear at any age from child to adulthood but peak incidence is reported in the second and third decade. The age of onset usually varies between the sexes. Its prevalence is approximately 0.1% to 2% of people including adults and children worldwide and it affects all races equally.

HOW DOES VITILIGO START?

Vitiligo usually begins with a few small lighter patches that develop on the skin. These patches may stay the same size for years or grow larger. New patches can appear on the skin. The new patches may be close to existing patches or far from them. If an individual develops a few spots or patches that appear in one or a few places on the body, it is referred as **localized vitiligo**. When vitiligo causes scattered patches of colour loss on different areas of the body, it's called **generalized vitiligo**. While rare, some people lose most of their skin colour. This is called **universal vitiligo**.

CLASSIFICATION

- **SEGMENTAL:** In this type the skin gets affected by only one side. Also called unilateral vitiligo, this type causes the skin to lose colour on one side or part of the body. This type tends to stabilize, meaning that the colour loss stops. Once it stops, most people with segmental vitiligo don't develop new patches or spots.
- **NON- SEGMENTAL:** Here the skin gets affected by both sides and the area of the skin affected with vitiligo keeps on expanding with time. This is the most common type of vitiligo tends to spread slowly with new patches developing off and on throughout a person's life.



Fig: Segmental Vitiligo



Fig: Non-Segmental Vitiligo

SYMPTOMS

It is progressive type of disease with gradual destruction of melanocytes in epidermis resulting in depigmented, a-pigmented or hypo-pigmented areas on the skin. Though it can affect any part of the body the pigmentation usually occurs in the areas which are prominently exposed to the sun. It generally starts with small spots on exposed areas especially the bone joints are the first areas to be affected.

The presentation would be in the form of:

- Patchy areas of depigmented skin

- Loss of skin colour.
- Premature greying of hair
- The hair on the patches become white with time
- Easily visible spots.
- The patient may have depression or other psychological disorders.
- The sensitivity of the skin to sunlight.
- Vision problems.
- Intolerance to cold

CAN WE STOP VITILIGO FROM SPREADING?

No single treatment works for everyone, when it comes to stopping the spread, sun protection is also extremely important. Skin with vitiligo burns easily, as there is no pigment to protect the skin from the sun's rays. A bad sunburn can worsen vitiligo, hence protection from direct exposure would be ideal. This could be in the form of seeking shade, wearing sun protective clothing etc.

TREATMENT

Various types of topical and systemic medications, phototherapy, laser therapy, and surgical therapy are used for the treatment of vitiligo. However complete cure from the disease is still not possible.

VITILIGO IN AYURVEDA PERSPECTIVE

Ayurveda is considered to be one of the most ancient and holistic ways of treatment as established by decades of research and practices. It is known to treat the ailments from the root cause. Treatment plan will be designed taking in account of the disease pattern, patient's age, occupation and body constitution.

In Ayurveda majority of skin ailments are considered as minor (*Kshudra*) diseases. But as in vitiligo (*Shwitra*), in spite of manifestation of disease over the skin, there may be systemic involvement.

ETIOLOGY ACCORDING TO AYURVEDA

Vitiligo can be correlated to *Shwitra* in Ayurveda and untruthfulness, ingratitude, disrespect for gods and consumption of mutually contradictory food etc. are its main etiological factors. As per Ayurveda, it has same causative factors as *Kushtha* but it is without discharge, vitiated with three doshas i.e., *Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha doshas*.

MANAGEMENT OF VITILIGO IN AYURVEDA

Vitiligo could be well treated with the support of immunity improvement which Ayurveda can do at its best. Along with balancing the immunity the focus should be on re-pigmentation through melanocyte cell activation. This could be achieved by various treatment procedures mentioned in the classics of Ayurveda.

Following module of treatment could be adopted:

- a. Internal medication

b. External treatment

- **Stimulation of pigmentation:** this could be achieved by application of suitable drugs on the lesion to stimulate the cells for re-pigmentation
- **Provide favourable conditions in the skin for better pigmentation:** pigment cells multiply very slowly like nerve cells. So, herbs can be given to provide better environment for pigment cells to grow quickly
- **To preserve the pigmentation:** which is already been formed by using different herbal combinations in adequate dosage.
- **Suitable oil application:** oil application followed by exposure of lesion to the sun rays as long as the patient can tolerate.
- **Lepa application:** various herbal and herbo-mineral drugs are combined and mentioned in classic for the application on the lesion of vitiligo in the form of Lepa.



c. Proper diet and regimen

d. Yoga practice

Moreover, balancing the body humors *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha* would be the main motto of the treatment. The main derangement is caused due to the aggravation of *Pitta Dosha* (*Bhrajaka Pitta*), which is responsible for giving colour to the skin. Hence treatment consists of pacifying imbalanced body energies, cleansing the blood and administering herbs that restore skin colour. Some of the common herbs include *Ashwagandha*, *Bakuchi*, *Apamarga*, *Guduchi*, *Tulasi*, *Haridra*, *Nimba*, and many herbs and herbal formulations in combination are used in Ayurveda for management of Vitiligo. However, over the counter use of any drugs should be strictly avoided and one has to get consulted from a practicing Ayurvedic physician for the better results.

The patient will also be advised to undergo purificatory therapies if needed to detoxify the toxins accumulated at the deeper layers. This also include restoring the digestion power of the individual. The individual would be required to correct the diet and lifestyle and follow the rituals to prevent recurrence of the disorder.