

Hiding Behind a Brown Mask?

Learning to Treat Melasma

By Beatriz H Porras, M.D.
Skin Diagnostics Laser and Rejuvenation.
www.cincinnatiaskinlaser.com. Dr Porras is a member of the American Academy of Dermatology, the American Society of Cosmetic Dermatology and Esthetic Surgery and The American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery.



If your beautiful skin is hidden behind a brown mask, you may have Melasma. If you think you are alone, think again. An estimated six million women in the U.S.A. are currently affected by this distressing disorder. Melasma, widely known as the mask of pregnancy or chloasma, is characterized by a dark brown discoloration found on sun-exposed areas of the face; apples of the cheeks, chin, nose, areas around the mouth and mid-forehead. You don't have to be pregnant or even be a woman; it can also affect men who use after-shave lotions, scented soaps and other toiletries.

The Cause

Overactive melanocytes (the cells that produce color in the skin) are the reason for this condition. These pigment-producing cells become over-stimulated to produce darker color in patchy areas. Triggers include: estrogen supplements, birth control pills, pregnancy, and sun exposure. Genetic factors are also important. For instance, if your mother had it, you may have it as well. Melasma is more pronounced during and after the summer months as a result of sun exposure. It is also called the mask of pregnancy since it is observed during pregnancy and breast-feeding. Repeated pregnancies can intensify the pigmentation. It also occurs as a side effect of use of contraceptive pills and injected contraceptive preparations. It is also common in postmenopausal women taking hormonal replacement. Sun exposure, following the use of soaps, scented toiletries and various cosmetics can also produce this mottled pigmentation, and it is due to ultraviolet radiation being absorbed by the chemical substance (perfume, cologne) on the skin. This pigmentation can extend down to the neck where perfumes are more commonly applied.

Melasma is more common in darker skin types IV, V and VI, including American Indians, Hispanics, Middle Easterners, Africans and African Americans, but in my experience

almost any body can have melasma. In my practice I have seen fair patients with blue/green eyes, blonde hair and skin type II with Melasma.

The Good News

Melasma is a disorder that brings a great cosmetic concern. The good news is it can be treated. If you think you have Melasma visit your dermatologist soon. As a rule, any persistent darkening or lightening of the skin should be looked at by a Dermatologist. The first step is to determine the cause. A complete medical history and proper physical examination including a closer examination with a Wood's lamp may be performed. The next step is to eliminate the causes.

Here are a few important recommendations. If you are on hormonal contraception, consider stopping this. Visit your gynecologist to substitute another method of contraception. Sun avoidance and use of adequate sun protection are the most important first steps. Use a broad-spectrum UVA and UVB sun block containing Zinc Oxide or Titanium Dioxide with SPF of at least 20. Avoid strong soaps or abrasive cleansers. Use only products that are color-free and fragrance-free. Do not apply your perfume on the neck; apply it on the wrists.

Eliminating all these factors will help; however, Melasma is not that simple. If the darkening of the skin is deeper in the layers of the skin and it has been present for a long time it is more difficult to treat. If the pigment is more recent and superficial the possibilities to treat it are better and it is easier to lighten it. In general, Melasma that is more recent and superficial will respond better to treatment. Visit your dermatologist as soon as possible; he or she will tailor a treatment for you.

Medical Treatments

Medical treatments for superficial Melasma include prescription bleaching creams containing hydroquinone and tretinoin; my favorite is Triluma®. There are other preparations containing Azelaic acid, Glycolic acid, Lactic acid and Kojic acid. If you are looking for a more dramatic improvement you may have to look to more invasive treatments that should be done by either a dermatologist or plastic surgeon. Genesis, a laser modality, combined with microdermabrasion and IPL are non-ablative techniques that, without

down-time, will dramatically improve this problem. However, several treatments are required and compliance and patience are needed. Laser Resurfacing with an Erbium laser in the hands of a well-trained physician is very effective when combined with medical treatments and daily sun-block use. Laser resurfacing has down-time, several days of redness.

The daily use of medical-grade skin products helps to maintain a good complexion; Dermamed, a line of medical-grade skin products, offers a skin care kit that contains the complete daily routine for patients with melasma, including cleanser, moisturizer, sun block and bleaching serum.

Skin lightening is not a quick process. Depending on how dark the spots are compared to your normal skin, it can take from three months to one year to see results. If you have darker skin types, make sure your skin doctor is experienced with your skin type and that he or she has the appropriate lasers to treat your skin type.

Once you have lightened up your dark spots, maintenance is required to keep the skin clear. This means sun avoidance, sun protection and continuous use of an appropriate skin care regimen. Let your natural beauty show, and treat your Melasma. Don't hide behind a brown mask.

Skin Diagnostics Laser and Rejuvenation offers Medical Grade products and laser treatments to treat Melasma. Doctor Porras has wide experience treating all skin types. Call us for an appointment at 513 631 0059 or visit our website at www.cincinnatiaskinlaser.com

