

Turn Back the Clock on Age Spots

Q: What are the different types of age spots?

A: Some age spots are the result of sun damage and others are caused by genetics. They are usually brown or red, depending on the type, and can be smooth or scaly.

Freckles and liver spots are thin, brown specks called lentigines that often appear on the face and the backs of hands. Larger spots can sometimes show up on the chest or back.

Liver spots get their name not because they are associated with the liver — but because they are roughly the same color as the liver.

Lentigines are caused by both genetics and sun damage. In fact, you can tell which hand a golfer wears his glove on — the other is usually covered in lentigines.

The red scaly spots, called actinic keratoses, are the most serious. Caused by sun damage, keratoses are precancerous and can lead to squamous cell carcinoma.

Q: Can age spots be a sign of some other medical condition?

A: Many experts believe the skin is a window into systemic diseases within the body. Fortunately, most spots on the skin are nothing more than a sign of aging.

However, some can indicate underlying disorders. If you experience any of these three types, consult with your dermatologist:

- Although they are rare, oil glands that are numerous or rapidly changing may be associated with colon polyps and/or cancer in a syndrome called Muir-Torre. These skin tumors can appear anywhere on the body and in various sizes and shapes.
- Thick, dark age spots that look like warts are called seborrheic keratoses and occasionally appear very suddenly and in large numbers. This may be a sign of malignancy.
- Freckles may also be a harbinger of internal malignancies when they appear in odd locations. Irregular freckles may actually be melanomas.

Q: Can you prevent age spots?

A: Many age spots can be avoided, and most can be

treated if they occur. Using sunblock can decrease your risk of getting lentigine and actinic keratosis, and using tretinoin (Retin A) can undo damage from the sun.

Seborrheic keratoses are age spots that are darker and less flaky than actinic keratosis, and they are hereditary and not associated with sun damage.

You can't avoid them, but you can treat them once they appear.

Q: What treatment options are available?

A: There are many. I recommend liquid nitrogen, chemical peels, intense pulsed lights, or laser treatment. These treatments vary greatly, and before undergoing any of them, it is important to understand the risks, costs, and need for multiple treatments associated.

Each can be customized to suit the person's lifestyle, skin type, budget, risk tolerance, and type of lesions.

In some instances, I use very high-tech methods to deal with age spots. In others, we use simple things such as the nitrogen treatments.

No matter what type of treatment you decide to do, be realistic. Don't expect the spots to disappear overnight.

If you begin a treatment and it doesn't work, speak with your doctor about alternatives. Some practices will refer you to a physician who has a particular device that may be suited to your needs.

One note of caution: When treating large areas such as a whole face or both arms, significant downtime could be required to see a measurable difference. There is no magic wand to make age spots vanish, so plan accordingly.

Dr. Kenneth Beer is a leading Palm Beach board-certified dermatologist and dermatopathologist and the director of scientificskin.com. He is the director of The Cosmetic Bootcamp, which trains physicians in best practices for cosmetic medicine. Dr. Beer is also an instructor in dermatology at the University of Miami, and an A.B. Duke Scholar at Duke University.

