

SKINCARE

# You Don't Have to Live With Hyperpigmentation! Here's How to Fade It For Good

Sara Spruch-Feiner

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Maybe you recently gave birth. Maybe you had a particularly sun-filled summer. Or just maybe, you haven't changed anything about your entire routine lately. Regardless, you're seeing unexpectedly darker, blotchy areas on your face. And your favorite concealer isn't doing much to cover it.

Unfortunately, you might be dealing with hyperpigmentation. But don't consider this a skincare life sentence! Keep reading for the total breakdown of this concern, how to prevent it, and how to treat it once it's appeared.

## What is hyperpigmentation?

The world of skincare demands a glossary all its own, and it's easy to get confused. Put simply, hyperpigmentation refers to an increase in production of pigment. In this case, it occurs in skin when it's injured or triggered.

While sun damage is the most common cause of hyperpigmentation, there are other contributing factors, including "hormones such as estrogen (pregnancy state or oral contraceptives), as well as medications such as tetracyclines, antimalarial drugs, metals, and chemotherapeutic drugs," explains dermatologist Dr. Ana Benitez-Graham of Central Carolina Skin & Dermatology Center. "Although it is clinically benign, it can cause significant cosmetic and psychosocial distress." Luckily, it can be (at the very least) partially prevented and reversed.

## Does hyperpigmentation affect people differently?

Yes. If you have deeper skin, the risk and likelihood of hyperpigmentation is higher than for someone with a lighter complexion. "All individuals have approximately the same number of melanocytes," says Dr. Benitez-Graham (remember, melanocytes are the cells responsible for making pigment). "However, people with dark skin have melanocytes with more pigment-producing power — so they produce more pigment to the same trauma or events than people with lighter skin."

Translation: If your skin is deeper, your melanocytes are already used to create the pigment responsible for your rich, deep complexion. So, if your skin is faced with an injury (say, sun damage or post-acne scarring), it will react by creating dark marks.



## How can I prevent hyperpigmentation from happening to me?

Like so much else in skincare, the *best* prevention comes in the form of the ultimate dermatological cardinal rule: always wear adequately protective SPF. According to dermatologist [Dr. Kristina Goldenberg](#) of Goldenberg Dermatology, that means high-level SPF even on cloudy days.

Adds Dr. Benitez-Graham, “We get sun exposure anytime you see light, [including] when you are in the car, or even inside the house through windows.”

In addition to wearing a floppy hat outdoors and avoiding baking in the sun for hours, you should look for a topical product that not only protects from UVA and UVB rays, but also from HEV. That’s the blue light we all get way too much exposure to, thanks to our cell phones and computers. Try the new Paula’s Choice® DEFENSE Essential Glow Moisturizer with SPF 30 (\$29), which does just that—and fortifies the skin with antioxidants that protect against the elements.

Along with SPF, antioxidants can be key players in your prevention regimen too (all the more important if you know your skin is prone to hyperpigmentation). According to Dr. Steven Jepsen, founder of the Utah Dermatologic & Medical Procedures Clinic, vitamin C is the most popular topical antioxidant.

“It helps protect collagen from damaging free radicals produced by sun and pollution exposure,” he explains. “It also blocks one of the chemical pathways leading to abnormal pigment production by your skin cells. Dr. Jepsen recommends looking for products containing at least 15 to 20 percent, as these are the most efficacious.

SkinCeuticals C E Ferulic® with 15% L-Ascorbic Acid (\$166) is often considered the beauty industry’s gold standard in the antioxidant category. That’s thanks to its use of highly concentrated L-ascorbic acid (vitamin C’s scientific name) and the antioxidant ferulic acid, which works synergistically to help protect against free radicals and environmental damage, and help increase vitamin C’s efficacy.



## I already have hyperpigmentation. Are there at-home treatments I can try?

If you're already dealing with pigmentation woes, there are a number of tried-and-true ingredients that dermatologists swear by. The question is finding the right one for you — and making sure the formulation uses ingredients at a potent-enough level to help brighten dark spots. We recommend consulting with a professional to make sure you're choosing the best product for you.

For a long time, hydroquinone was considered the star ingredient for treating pigmented areas. While dermatologists still recommend it, it's fallen partially out of favor. "Hydroquinone is probably the most potent topical lightening ingredient," Dr. Goldenberg says, noting that this ingredient "must be used with caution because it can *overcorrect* and leave white marks around the dark spot." If you still want to try it, look for a formula that uses it in a lower percentage. We like ProActiv® Advanced Dark Spot Correcting Serum (\$50), which uses two percent of the controversial ingredient to tackle dark spots.

If you're not interested, good news: there are a growing number of alternative ingredients to look for. In hydroquinone's place, other ingredients have gained popularity to treat hyperpigmentation safely. Arbutin is one such example, which can come from bearberry, or be synthetically derived. According to Dr. Goldenberg, it has "skin lightening properties similar to hydroquinone, but without some of the risks associated with hydroquinone. Arbutin is featured in IS Clinical® White Lightening Serum (\$125), alongside brightening Norwegian kelp extract.

Niacinamide, also known as vitamin B3, is an ingredient star on the rise. It does everything from helping to improve skin tone and reducing the appearance of pores to imparting skin with a healthy glow. Get a straight-up shot of this super vitamin in the Paula's Choice® 10% Niacinamide Booster (\$42), which can be used alone as a water serum or mixed into your moisturizer of choice.

Niacinamide can also be found *with* tranexamic acid (a synthetic amino acid with increasing evidence of correcting the appearance of hyperpigmentation) in SkinMedica® Lytera 2.0® (\$154). This is Dr. Jepson's preferred recommendation and a workhorse serum formulated to address even the most stubborn hyperpigmentation. It's also designed to work in tandem with in-office treatments (more on those later).

Kojic acid, a by-product of the fermentation of rice used to make sake is another effective, gentle option. "It helps lighten the skin evenly with no risk of depigmentation," Dr. Goldenberg says. Find it blended with the aforementioned arbutin in SkinCeuticals® Phyto+ (\$85), a botanically-based gel serum that helps diminish discoloration.

Finally, you can look to tretinoin, a prescription-strength form of retinol, which is perhaps the most tried-and-true, dermatologist-beloved ingredient in all of skincare. (Read more about retinol and its derivatives here.) According to Dr. Goldenberg, tretinoin is "an absolute must!" She adds, "It has many benefits for the skin, one of which is evening out the skin tone." It can, however, cause irritation and is best used in small amounts. Ask your dermatologist if a prescription is right for you, or try Curology<sup>SM</sup>, which pairs users with a licensed medical professional to provide a prescription-strength cream, shipped to your door each month.



### **I want something a little more powerful — what treatments can I try in a doctor’s office?**

There are a number of in-office treatments of varying degrees of intensity, that can help address stubborn hyperpigmentation. One of the most popular options is IPL, or intense pulsed light. This device uses light (and heat from that light), to target and break down pigmentation. It can cost approximately \$700 to \$1,200 per session, but one major upside is that there is almost no downtime associated with this treatment. Certain lasers also work to diminish hyperpigmentation. Depending on which treatment is used, these can also be great options for those who want to avoid downtime. [Learn more about these lasers here.](#)

Finally, according to Dr. Goldenberg, treatments like microneedling with PRP (platelet-rich plasma) and chemical peels can also help. These work to peel off the superficial layers of skin where pigmentation occur, prompting the skin to regenerate. As a result, its texture and tone improve.

For microneedling with PRP, Dr. Goldenberg recommends three treatments (approximately \$1,200 each) one month apart. The downtime is approximately three to five days. As for chemical peels, she recommends five treatments one month apart (they’re about \$300 a pop) and says these are particularly effective if you want to get your skin looking its best before a special occasion. Above all, though, you should consult your doctor to decide which treatments are right for you and your skincare needs.