

Age Spots ("Sun Spots" or "Liver Spots")

How to prevent and treat them

Age spots, also called liver spots or sun spots, are small, brown spots or marks that appear on your skin. They may be flat or slightly scaly. Age spots are different than freckles because they are larger and darker. They don't appear darker in the summer or fade in the winter like true freckles. Age spots occur most often on a person's face, the backs of their hands, their forearms, upper back, and legs.

Age spots are sometimes called liver spots, but they have nothing to do with liver disease. They may be caused by several factors including your age, skin color, and – most importantly – the amount of exposure you've had to the sun. About 70 percent of people over the age of 55 have at least a few age spots. Fair-skinned people develop them nine times more frequently than people with darker skin. Age spots often occur if you have had a lot of exposure to the sun, especially if you are fair-skinned and sunburn easily.

Most age spots are harmless. Some brown or black spots can be signs of skin cancer. Detected and treated early, skin cancers are minor. However, some may actually be malignant melanomas, a more serious type of cancer that can be fatal if left untreated.

How to prevent age spots

To lessen your risk of developing age spots, skin cancers, and malignant melanomas, avoid exposure to the sun. Try these steps to protect yourself and your children:

1. Do fewer outdoor activities between the hours of 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. This is when the sun's rays are brightest. If you must be outside, be sure to protect yourself with sunscreen and clothing.
2. Clothes are the best, most reliable protection. Wear a broad-brimmed hat (3-4 inches) to protect your face and a light-colored, long-sleeved shirt.
3. Whenever you go outside, use sunscreen on the exposed parts of your body. Choose a sunscreen that has a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of at least 15 or higher. The best products will block ultraviolet rays (both UVA and UVB) with either 8% zinc oxide, 8% titanium dioxide, or 3% avobenzone. Apply sunscreen liberally 30 minutes before going out into the sun. Reapply it every two hours and after swimming.
4. Do not lie out in the sun to get a tan or use a tanning booth.
5. Much of the sun's damage occurs when we are children and teens. So, it's especially important to protect children from sun exposure using the suggestions above.

Treatment options

If you already have some age spots, you may be able to lighten them by using an over-the-counter product. Look for products that contain an ingredient called hydroquinone, such as Esoterica or Porcelana. To notice a change, you must also follow the sun protection steps described in the above section. If the spots don't fade with the use of over-the-counter products, you may want to try cosmetic therapies such as chemical peeling, cryotherapy, or laser treatment. These procedures may improve the appearance of your skin. Since they are considered cosmetic and not essential to your health, they are not a covered benefit provided by your Kaiser Permanente Health Plan. Visit kpcosmeticservices.com for more information.

When to call Kaiser Permanente

Call your doctor or other health care professional immediately if you notice any of the warning signs of cancerous moles or melanomas. The “ABCDE’s for self-monitoring” below can help you identify signs that require an exam by your doctor:

- **A**symmetrical shape: One half of the mole doesn't look like the other half.
- **B**order irregularity: The border or edge of the mole or skin spot is irregular, ragged, or blurred.
- **C**olor varied: For example, there are shades of red, gray, or black, or a red, white, and blue mottled appearance in an otherwise tan mole or freckle.
- **D**iameter: The diameter of your mole is larger than a pencil eraser.
- **E**volution: You notice any growth or change over time.

Other signs to look for include:

- Oozing, scaliness, or bleeding into the surrounding skin area
- Any change in the appearance of a mole
- Itching, tenderness, or pain

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, Healthy Living classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, Healthy Living programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.