

# Black light helps diagnose common skin problem found in pregnant women

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Researchers at Boston Medical Center (BMC) and Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) have found that using a black light, or Wood's light, helps dermatologists determine disease extent of melasma, a hyperpigmentation condition that causes brown and gray patches to appear on the face.

Melasma is most common among women, and often appears during pregnancy due to [hormonal changes](#), leading many to refer to it as "the mask of pregnancy". Most people notice [skin discoloration](#) on their cheeks, forehead, chin and bridge of their nose. The patches can also appear on parts of the body that are exposed to the sun like the arms and neck. When left undiagnosed, the brown and gray spots on the [skin](#) continue to darken and can alter a patient's appearance and quality of life.

"In some cases, melasma can be very difficult to detect with the naked eye," said Neelam Vashi, MD, director of the Center for Ethnic Skin at BMC and Boston University. "Using a black [light](#) allows us to assess the extent of the [disease](#) and counsel patients on sun protection measures and treatment options."

A black light detects changes in color or fluorescence in the skin, making pigment disorders appear to shine under the light. It has been suggested as an aid in diagnosing melasma depth, but this is the first study to find a significant quantitative difference between viewing the skin under natural light versus under a black light when evaluating extent

in those with subtle disease.

"Early detection is critical in treating this disease before it worsens. Without the use of a black light, the extent of the disease could go unnoticed and worsen over time with ultraviolet ray exposure or laser therapy. Treatment for melasma needs to be maintained, otherwise there is risk of the condition returning", said Vashi who is also an assistant professor of dermatology at BUSM.

Melasma treatments include topical creams, chemical peels, microdermabrasion, and sun protection. Researchers recommend that women protect themselves by applying sunblock every two hours when out in the sun or avoiding sun exposure altogether for those with a genetic predisposition, who are pregnant or have a known family history of melasma.

The study was published online in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*.

Provided by Boston University Medical Center

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