

Race can affect many skin conditions

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(HealthDay)—Skin conditions are significantly impacted by your skin color, a dermatologist says.

"Ethnicity and skin tone can make a big difference in terms of diagnosis and treatment options with a number of different skin conditions," said Dr. Amy McMichael, chair of dermatology at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem, N.C.

The amount of melanin—the pigment that gives skin its color—can greatly influence a person's risk of and reaction to many different skin conditions. For example, a fair-skinned person with a low level of melanin has a far higher risk of sunburn than someone with a melanin-rich dark complexion.

But darker-skinned people aren't totally protected from the sun's ultraviolet rays. Also, their higher melanin levels make their skin more reactive to inflammation and injury, McMichael said. This can result in problems such as long-lasting or permanent dark spots (hyperpigmentation) at the sites of even relatively minor irritations, such as insect bites.

"There are a lot of myths out there about which groups are or are not affected by certain conditions," McMichael said in a [medical center](#) news release. She is the only black woman to chair a university dermatology department in the United States.

"That African-Americans don't get psoriasis is a big one. We've found that a number of people of African descent not only have it but that it can be a lot worse and a lot more extensive. And psoriasis is one of the [conditions](#) that can look so different in people with darker [skin](#) that it's confusing and often not recognized by family physicians or even people trained in dermatology," she added.

The distinctions are important, McMichael noted, because the U.S. population by 2050 will have minorities in the majority.

"This means that many [doctors] are going to be dealing with patients of all ethnicities, even ones we're not necessarily familiar with," she said.

"We'll have to be versatile, to take into consideration how their pigmentation or cultural practices affect their particular problem and how it can best be addressed."

More information: The U.S. National Institutes of Health offers advice on keeping your [skin healthy](#).

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