Your Complexion Can Affect Diseases and Disorders of the Skin

Dermatologists should consider patients' skin color when diagnosing and treating their skin conditions.

June 26, 2018 By Alicia Green

Many factors—both internal and external—can trigger skin diseases and disorders. But doctors should learn more about how a person's ethnicity and skin tone may affect the development of these illnesses, reports Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center.

According to Amy McMichael, MD, chair of dermatology at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the complexion of folks in different ethnic groups can impact the diagnosis and treatment of an array of skin conditions.

For example, darker-complected people have more melanin compared with their fair-skinned counterparts. And although melanin helps defend against sunburn, darker individuals aren't fully protected from the sun's ultraviolet rays. Additionally, people with high melanin levels are more susceptible to inflammation and injury, which can sometimes lead to long-lasting or permanent dark spots—known as hyperpigmentation—from even minor skin irritations.

"There are a lot of myths out there about which groups are or are not affected by certain conditions. That African-Americans don't get psoriasis is a big one," McMichael said. "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."

In addition, there are misconceptions within ethnic groups about whether their members are at risk for particular dermatologic illnesses and about possible therapies to cure these conditions.

Medical practitioners must become more knowledgeable about pigmentation and cultural issues that affect patients' skin problems, McMichael stresses. By 2050, minorities in the United States will be in the majority and doctors will most likely be working with patients from ethnic groups unfamiliar to them.

Ideally, this would mean having more dermatologists trained in how to properly identify and treat

skin and hair conditions experienced by people of color as well as having more dermatologists who are members of minority groups.

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