

Skin color, care vary

Ethnic factors do matter

By MARY BROPHY MARCUS
Gannett News Service

White dermatologists didn't understand her skin, says Nakia Smith, 25, a longtime eczema sufferer. It was not until she visited Philadelphia dermatologist Susan Taylor, who, like Smith, is a woman of color, that the dry, scaly patches on her face and arms cleared up. "I had tried 50 million creams and was even told I'd just have to live with the eczema, but Dr. Taylor suggested things no one else had before. She understands my skin," says the postal worker and student in Lawnside, N.J.

Taylor is among a rising tide of dermatologists and spa owners who focus on the skin, hair and nail needs of women and men of color. Taylor, a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Dermatology, says all dermatologists should be well-versed in the differences between fair and dark skin.

"The demographics of our country are really changing, and many people of color are looking for a dermatologist familiar with their needs, even in the heartland, not just the metropolitan areas," Taylor says.

There's a definite need for such a specialty, says Rebat Halder, professor and chairman of the department of dermatology at Howard University in Washington, D.C. By 2050, Halder says, half the population in the USA will be either African-American, Latino Asian or Native American. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about one-third of the population now has skin of color.

Halder is president of a steadily growing professional organization, The Skin of Color Society, aimed at promoting education and research related to treating skin of color. Launched four years ago, its membership of mostly dermatologists has reached 100 and is increasing, Halder says.

Brown skin contains more melanin, or dark pigment, Taylor says. She says melanin levels vary dramatically among the ethnic groups.

Cells called melanocytes make the melanin. Melanocytes, the cells in the upper layer of the skin, are more reactive in darker skin and can release more melanin when they're irritated, says Hema Sundaram, a dermatologist in the Washington area.

"Any type of irritation to dark skin —

TO GET HELP

■ Where a dermatologist trained is more likely to tell you something about his or her expertise. Specialists trained in urban centers with high ethnic populations, such as New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, are more likely to be familiar with brown skin.

■ Make sure at least 25 percent or more of a dermatologist's practice includes patients with skin of color.

■ Do your homework and find out what lasers (for hair and mole removal, for example) are appropriate for brown skin.

■ Most dermatologists who treat skin of color do not recommend cosmetic treatments, such as peels and lasers, at medi-spas unless a dermatologist is present at all times and technicians are thoroughly trained and experienced.

■ Request a test spot in an inconspicuous part of your body before having a full skin treatment.

■ Ask about post-procedural help masking patchy or healing skin. "There is a psychological component. If you don't look wounded, you don't feel wounded," says dermatologist Hema Sundaram.

Sources: Rebat Halder, Susan Taylor, Hema Sundaram, Peggy Fuller and Flor Mayoral

an ingrown hair, acne or a poor laser treatment — can cause dark discoloration, called hyperpigmentation, that will last for months, even years," says Sundaram, who notes that scars on white skin tend to be pink and resolve more quickly.

Brown-skinned people are more vulnerable to melasma (dark patches resulting from pregnancy and genetics) and vitiligo (a genetic condition that causes uneven-shaped areas with no pigmentation at all) as well, Taylor says. Certain medications for high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease also can cause brown skin to discolor.

Skin cancer is often overlooked in people of color because it is assumed they just don't develop the disease, says Peggy Fuller, a dermatologist in Charlotte. "Have you ever seen a skin cancer pamphlet with pictures of black skin with a melanoma?"

Says Taylor, "Skin conditions and treatments should not always be dealt with the same way in whites as they are in skin of color."

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