

Help! I've Been Spotted!

Sure, freckles can be cute, but brown spots on your face CAN be embarrassing—and troubling. How do you know what to do or when to worry? Alissandro “Andy” Castillo, M.D., M.B.A., medical director at M.D. Laser Studio, answered some of these questions below.

Q: *What exactly ARE brown spots?*

Dr. Andy: Skin discoloration can be many things. It could be freckles, which are harmless. It could be lentigo—sun-induced spots—commonly referred to as age or liver spots. Neither is cancerous, but they can be a cosmetic concern.

Q: *When do I worry about brown spots?*

Dr. Andy: Worry if the brown spot is ulcerated or raw, or if it cycles in healing, never really going away. This can be a sign of pre-cancer, such as actinic keratosis, or cancer, such as basal cell, squamous cell, or worst yet, melanoma.

Q: *How do I know if my brown spot is cancerous?*

Dr. Andy: As a physician, I look for these features, following the ABCs:

- A - Asymmetry or uneven shape
- B - Border, if it is irregular
- C - Color, if it has purples, blues, or greens
- D - Diameter; more than six millimeters
- E - Elevation, if it is raised from the skin
- F - Family history—in first- or second-degree relatives
- G - Growth, if it is rapid

Remember, a brown spot having one or two of these features may be of little concern, but the more you have, the more suspicious you should be. Most certainly, bring it to the attention of your physician as soon as possible. Cancers ultimately are diagnosed with biopsy.



Q: *I've heard to look for raised spots with irregular shapes, but I've had these spots for years. Should I still worry?*

Dr. Andy: You know your skin better than anyone. If you notice changes, see a medical professional. You could have seborrheic keratosis, which can be raised and have a waxy appearance. These are benign, but can become irritated.

Q: *What about this whole patch of brown on my cheeks and forehead?*

Dr. Andy: What you're referring to is most likely melasma, sometimes called pregnancy mask since it tends to affect women of reproductive age. These spots are flat and brown, typically symmetric, often appearing on the forehead, cheeks, and upper lip. Melasma is associated with estrogen, aggravated by use of oral contraceptives or pregnancy, and will darken with sun exposure. This is one of the more stubborn pigmented ailments—it can significantly impact your appearance and can be difficult for a physician to treat.

Q: *So, what ARE my options for treatment of brown spots?*

Dr. Andy: All of the conditions we discussed can be treated, with varying degrees of success. You can use bleaching agents like hydroquinone, chemical or laser peels, laser or IPL, cryosurgery, ablative or vaporizing lasers, or surgical excisions. Treatment options are dictated by the nature of the problem and by what is available to your physician. Choose an option that takes into consideration the final aesthetic outcome. Seek as many opinions as necessary until you are comfortable that you are making the best decision for you. ☞