
Birthmarks

Birthmarks are colored skin spots that either are present at birth or develop shortly after birth. Some birthmarks are only colorations on the surface of the skin; others are raised above the surface of the skin or extend into the tissues under the skin. Birthmarks are quite common in childhood, and many of these marks will fade and disappear as the child grows older. However, some birthmarks are permanent.

Types of birthmarks

There are four common kinds of birthmarks: pigmentation-type birthmarks (moles and café-au-lait spots), macular stains (salmon patches), hemangiomas (strawberry birthmarks), and vascular malformations (port-wine stains).

1. Pigmentation-type birthmarks include congenital nevi (moles) and café-au-lait spots (meaning, the color of “coffee with cream”). Moles are pigmented skin spots that are present from birth. Some large moles may have cancerous changes later in life. Cafe-au-lait spots are caused by too much color (pigment) in the skin. Most cafe-au-lait spots do not go away, may increase in number, but do not require treatment.
2. Macular stains, or salmon patches, are very thin, light pink, flat patches of discoloration. They often develop along a baby's hairline on the back (nape) of the neck (“stork bites”), on the baby's upper eyelids or upper lip, or between the eyebrows (“angel kisses”). Most salmon patches on the eyelids fade without treatment within the first year of life. Most salmon patches on the nape of the neck do not fade.
3. Hemangiomas (strawberry birthmarks) are soft, red lumps just under the skin's surface, created by clusters of blood vessels. They may appear either at birth or within the few months following birth. Typically, they grow larger for up to six months, stabilize for a short period, and then begin to fade. Sixty percent of strawberry birthmarks disappear by the age of 5, and nearly all of them are gone by the age of 9 with no scarring or other sign. No treatment is needed except in the rare cases when they continue to grow, or if they are in a location that interferes with normal body functions, such as an eyelid, which might cause a problem with vision.
4. Vascular malformations (port-wine stains) are light pink or wine-colored birthmarks occurring most often on the head or face. These birthmarks are permanent, and they even tend to get darker with age. They may be only a few inches wide or may cover a large portion of the body. Port-wine stains are usually harmless and remain the same size throughout a person's life.

Symptoms

The appearance and characteristics of birthmarks can vary widely. Birthmarks can ...

- be flat or raised
- have regular or irregular borders
- be many different colors, including brown, black, pale blue, pink, red, or purple
- be only on the surface of the skin or extend into the tissues under the skin

- grow quickly, remain the same size, or shrink

All birthmarks should be checked by a dermatologist (skin doctor) or other medical professional. Some symptoms that occur with birthmarks indicate that the birthmark needs to be checked again and perhaps treated.

See your doctor or other medical professional if a birthmark ...

- bleeds
- develops an open sore (ulcer)
- becomes infected
- interferes with normal functioning or vision

Treatment

Call your doctor or other professional if you're concerned that birthmarks are causing a medical problem, if a strawberry birthmark continues to grow, or if your child has a particularly large port-wine stain. A large port-wine stain that continues to grow should be evaluated at some point.

Many birthmarks fade over time and require no treatment. Some birthmarks, such as cafe-au-lait spots, usually do not fade—however, they do not need treatment. If a birthmark develops in an area that makes a child self-conscious, makeup can be used to cover it. Additionally, if you want to pursue surgery for cosmetic reasons, it may be better to wait until your child is older. Birthmarks are best treated by cosmetic surgeons or dermatologists, who specialize in skin problems. You should know, however, that this type of cosmetic surgery is not generally covered by Kaiser Permanente or most other health insurance plans.

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- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

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