

Birthmarks

Any mark that is present on the skin at birth, or that develops soon afterwards, is called a birthmark. They are not rare – many children have a mark of some sort. Most are harmless and some go away as the child grows. Occasionally, a birthmark may be a sign of other problems or diseases. Check with your doctor if you are not sure, especially if the mark changes unexpectedly.

The cause of birthmarks

In most cases, the cause of a birthmark is unknown. They are certainly not caused by such things as the mother doing anything wrong during pregnancy. They happen by chance. The tendency to have birthmarks may be inherited; some marks may be similar to marks on other family members, but most are not. Some are caused by an overgrowth of fine blood vessels or of pigment (colour) cells.

Different types of birthmarks

There are various different types of birthmarks including:

- Naevus flammeus, also known as a stork bite or stork mark
- Mongolian spots
- Haemangioma of infancy, also known as a strawberry mark or strawberry naevus
- Café au lait spots
- Congenital melanocytic naevus.

Naevus flammeus or 'stork bite' mark

Other names for 'stork bite' mark include salmon patch or macular stain. The typical characteristics include:

- They are pink, flat and irregular-shaped marks.
- The skin is not thickened and you cannot feel any difference when you touch the mark.
- They are usually on the nape of the neck, eyelids, forehead and sometimes the sides of the nose and on the top lip.
- Nearly half of all babies have a 'stork bite' mark.
- The marks usually disappear by 12 months of age, if not earlier.
- The mark at the back of the neck may stay for longer, but it is usually covered by hair and out of sight.
- Occasionally, marks on the forehead, side of the nose and upper lip may also stay longer.

Mongolian spots

The typical characteristics of Mongolian spots include:

- They are bluish, irregular flat patches.
- They are mainly found on the back and bottom, although any area can be affected.
- There is no thickening or change to the feel of the skin.
- They are more common in babies from ethnic groups who have darker skin colouring, such as those with black hair and olive skin.
- They are harmless and become less obvious as the child grows.
- They can be confused with bruises.

Haemangioma of infancy or 'strawberry mark'

Another name for a strawberry mark is haemangioma of infancy. The typical characteristics include:

- They are red, raised and lumpy areas.
- They usually appear at around one to four weeks of age, then get bigger – sometimes quite quickly – for a few months.
- They stop growing between six and 12 months of age, then gradually disappear over the next few years.
- The skin of the birthmark is as strong as any other skin. It might rarely bleed if knocked hard or scratched, or develop an ulcer on the surface and need to be treated.
- Sometimes, the strawberry mark may grow on the face, near the eye. If it pushes on the eye it needs urgent treatment or the child may not develop normal vision.

It is not possible to predict exactly what will happen to a strawberry birthmark, but some will be gone by the age of two years, about 60 per cent by five years, and 90 to 95 per cent by nine years. It is usually best to allow them to go away by themselves, as there will be little or no scar left. However, if they are large, disfiguring, block vision or start to ulcerate, they should be treated.

Café au lait spots

The typical characteristics include:

- They are flat, roughly oval-shaped light brown (milk coffee coloured) spots.
- They may be present at birth or appear in early childhood.
- Many children have one or two of these – they are not signs of a health problem.

If your child has more than three or four spots, check with your doctor, as they can sometimes indicate a rare disease, such as neurofibromatosis.

Melanocytic naevus (congenital and acquired) also known as moles

The typical characteristics include:

- A congenital melanocytic naevus is a brown spot that is present at birth or in the first year of life.
- Acquired melanocytic naevi are much more common and develop in childhood from around the age of two.
- Some are large dark brown, blue or black birthmarks that sometimes grow dark hairs.
- Some are raised and lumpy, while others are flat and irregular in shape.

It is very rare for melanoma cancer to develop in such lesions later in life and even rarer in childhood. A sign that cancer may be developing includes changes of the skin on or around the mark.

Capillary malformation (port wine stain)

The typical characteristics include:

- They are flat, large or small areas of skin that are pink or purple in colour
- They are usually present from birth and the colour gets darker (from pale pink to deep red-purple) as the child grows.
- They may thicken and become lumpier around and after puberty.
- The marks are often on the face, sometimes just on one side. They may have a clear edge along the middle of the face, but they can appear anywhere on the body.
- Some of these marks, particularly on the face and leg, can be associated with other problems.

Treatment options for birthmarks

Most birthmarks are harmless but permanent. The only ones that fade with time are Mongolian spots and haemangiomas of infancy.

Treatment options may include:

- **Haemangioma of infancy** – sometimes a strawberry mark will grow over an eye or may block one side of the nose, ulcerate or cause other problems. In these cases, they can be treated with a drug called Propranolol.
- **Melanocytic naevus** – sometimes these will need to be removed surgically because the child finds the mark distressing. Others that start to grow, often during the teenage years, need to be carefully watched. If the mark changes, get it checked by your doctor.
- **Capillary malformations** – these don't go away by themselves. It is best to have expert advice about laser treatment early, because their appearance can affect a child's feelings about themselves. Laser therapy may give good results.

Symptoms of more serious problems

Very occasionally, port-wine-stain birthmarks may indicate the presence of a rare underlying disorder, including:

- **Sturge-Weber syndrome** – symptoms include a port-wine-stain birthmark on the upper eyelid and forehead, and abnormalities of the brain (and sometimes of an eye).
- **Klippel-Trenaunay-Weber syndrome** – symptoms include a port-wine-stain birthmark on the leg (usually). The bones, muscles and other tissue near the birthmark grow larger than the other normal limb.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Paediatrician
- Dermatologist

Things to remember

- Any mark that is present on the skin at birth, or that develops soon afterwards, is called a birthmark.
- Birthmarks are common – many children have a mark of some sort.
- Occasionally, a birthmark may be a sign of other problems or diseases.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australasian College of Dermatologists

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2011 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.