



**WESTERN CAPE
ASSOCIATION FOR
PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES**

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Sources

adding
value
to
lives

Focus on

Albinism

Statistics on albinism are incomplete but studies quoted by the World Health Organization reported in 2006 gave prevalence rates in South Africa as around one in 4 000 individuals are estimated to be born with albinism, compared with about 1 in 20 000 worldwide.

What is Albinism?

Albinism is an inherited condition where a person is unable to produce colouring of the skin, hair and eyes (lack of pigments). The condition can be limited to the eye or involve the eye and the skin.

What causes Albinism?

Albinism is caused by defects in the hereditary material that determines skin colour. People who have normal pigmentation could be carriers of the hereditary material that is defective for skin colour.

A carrier mother and father can pass their defective skin colour information on to their children which could then have albinism. It is important to note that a child with albinism received the defective information from both parents and that it is common for parents with normal skin colour to have a child with albinism. As explained above, albinism is an inherited, genetic disorder. Parents of a baby with albinism should never feel guilty about this, it is not their fault. It is a condition caused by the specific albinism genes that a baby has inherited from his/her mother and father at the time of conception.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Eyes

- Light brown to pale blue in colour
- Sensitivity to the sun (photophobia)
- Fast involuntary back and forth movement of the eyes, which improves with age (nystagmus).
- Squinting (strabismus)
- Visual impairment and low vision.

Skin

- Very pale in colour
- Freckling or pigmented patches might develop on sun –exposed areas (ephelides).
- Very sensitive to the sun (burns easily).

Hair

- Hair color ranges from white, yellow, light

brown to reddish.

- Eye lashes and brows whitish.

It is important to note that not all these signs and symptoms are present in all individuals with albinism and even siblings may vary in colouring and severity of symptoms.

Does albinism affect intelligence?

The intelligence of people with albinism are within the normal range, although infants with albinism may seem a little slower at first because of the visual problems with which they later learn to cope.

Can albinism be cured?

No. This condition is permanent but stable, i.e. the albinism will not progress. However, secondary conditions like light sensitivity, visual impairment and sunburn may worsen if not treated consistently.

Can albinism be prevented?

No - this is a genetic condition which is unpreventable.

How can one minimise the secondary effects?

Skin sensitivity

Because of the lack of pigments, the eyes and skin of people with albinism are very sensitive to light. Due to this sensitivity people with albinism may develop sores on their skin that could develop into skin cancer. To protect the eyes and skin from the harmful effects of the sun it is recommended that people with albinism

1. Keep out of the sun especially between 11h00 to 13h00
2. Use sun barrier cream with at least SPF 25 (sun protection factor) on sun exposed areas.
3. Use lip protection cream of at least SPF 25
4. Use large brimmed hats.
- 5.
6. Long sleeved cotton shirts and blouses with high collars
7. Wear long pants whenever possible, to protect the legs

Visual impairment

1. Wear sunglasses when outdoors, even on overcast days.
2. Use large brimmed hats.
3. Regular checkups with your optometrist.