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Want Brighter Underarms? Read This Before You DIY



The way we care for our armpits isn't one-size-fits-all. Some people choose to embrace their hairs, while others never miss a laser appointment. Some prefer spraying on an antiperspirant over swiping on a natural deodorant stick. There's also a difference in the way people approach hyperpigmentation, or darkened skin, under their arms. This natural (and very common) occurrence can leave some unbothered, while others are looking for a way to even out the skin in that area. As the saying goes: To each their own.

If you are looking to brighten the skin under your arms, you've likely come across a few time-lapse videos on Instagram of quick, do-it-yourself hacks, like lemon masks and sugar scrubs. But are those natural ingredients actually effective? We turned to dermatologists to answer all our armpit hyperpigmentation questions, ahead.

Why do we get dark armpits?

Darkened skin in the underarm area is very common and can happen for a number of reasons, according to **dermatologist Sheel Desai Solomon, MD**. "Many people develop darkened pigmentation under their armpits similar to the darker skin on the knees, elbows, groin, neck, or underbelly," she says. Darker pigmentation under the arms can be genetic, just like many other skin changes. Dermatologist Candrice Heath, MD, also notes that those with darker skin are more likely to get darkened armpits as they are more prone to hyperpigmentation.

Your health can also play a role in skin changes. Science has found a correlation between pigmentation and diabetes, and darker armpits can sometimes be considered a warning sign for the condition. "Studies have shown that people with diabetes have a higher propensity to be affected, as insulin can interfere with pigmentation in the skin," says Dr. Solomon. A similar insulin imbalance can cause darkened skin in people with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a disorder that affects hormones and can ultimately cause an overgrowth of the skin. In both cases, your darkened armpits might be something called acanthosis nigricans, and you should see a dermatologist for diagnosis and treatment.

On top of genetics and underlying health conditions, there are a few external factors that can cause darkening in the area. Deodorants and antiperspirants have ingredients that can irritate the skin, and any inflammation can lead to a thickening — and darkening — of the skin over time. "Many antiperspirants use aluminum as an active ingredient," says Dr. Solomon. "It clogs up sweat ducts and, in the process, irritates the skin." Other ingredients to look out for are fragrance and alcohol, both of which can be harsh on sensitive skin types. Another source of irritation: your razor. Shaving, especially on dry skin or with a dull blade, can cause the skin to darken and thicken over time.

How can you get rid of darkness under your arms?

While both of the dermatologists we spoke to do recommend natural home remedies to even out the skin under the arms, they both urge patients to be

cautious about the ingredients that you use. "As a dermatologist, I usually see the disasters," says Dr. Heath. "It's like a YouTube video gone wrong." The biggest DIY mistake both professionals see is over-exfoliating. While scrubbing with raw sugar might seem like a good idea, it'll only further irritate the area, which will cause more thickening if you do it excessively. Dr. Solomon also advises staying away from harsh, in-store scrubs that have sharp-edged particles, which could cause micro-abrasions.

Instead, she recommends an at-home chemical exfoliation twice a week. "Take one tablespoon of lemon juice (which works as lightening agent), one tablespoon of aloe vera, and mix them together," she says. "Apply this mixture on the armpits and leave for 10 minutes, then wash off normally." Solomon notes that, while this recipe includes lemon juice, you should always be careful about using acidic ingredients in DIY skin recipes. You want to mix citrus with gentle ingredients to balance its potency; when used alone it can aggravate sensitive skin and make the area more sensitive to the sun.

Solomon also recommends a mask of cucumber and aloe vera to nourish the layers of thickened skin. "Silica [in cucumber] stimulates the growth and preservation of the connective tissue in our skin," she says. "Aloe vera is rich in moisturizing and anti-inflammatory properties, and it contains the depigmenting element aloin." The refreshing properties from cucumber and aloe vera — which are both primarily made of water — also work to hydrate the skin.

If you're not noticing any changes within days, Dr. Solomon suggests seeing a dermatologist to determine if you need a stronger treatment that can't be found in your refrigerator, like a topical retinol cream or a professional peel. How can I prevent dark armpits?

When it comes to preventative measures, it's all about avoiding irritation. It's important to treat the skin under your arms similar to how you'd treat the skin on your face. So, if you have sensitive skin in the armpit area, look for natural deodorants without fragrances, aluminum, and alcohols.

Another suggestion: If you want the area to be hair-free, consider getting laser hair removal, which eliminates irritation from excessive shaving. If a series of laser appointments is out of your budget and you still want to get rid of the hair under your arms, you can reassess the way you shave. It's important to moisturize the hair and skin with a conditioning shaving cream to reduce pulling and friction. You also want to avoid dull razor blades that require repeated swiping, and make sure to shave in the direction of the hair growth, which is most often upward, so that you aren't tugging at the follicle.

Dark armpits are nothing out of the ordinary, as both derms have pointed out. If you want to brighten the area, which is your personal choice, it's important to remember that all your skin should be treated with care — including your armpits.

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