ECONOMIST ENTERPRISE

More than skin deep: the psychosocial impact of vitiligo



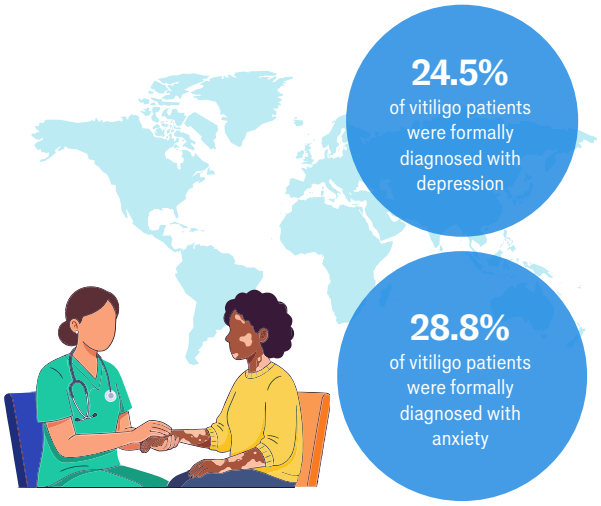
Supported by Pfizer

The bottom line

Vitiligo is more than a visible skin condition. Its psychological and social impacts can profoundly affect people's confidence, relationships, daily choices and quality of life. These wide-ranging impacts should be reflected in how vitiligo is managed: treating the skin alone is not enough. People living with the disease deserve care that addresses them as a whole person, including providing the emotional and social support they need.

Read on to learn more.

Vitiligo is an autoimmune disease that damages functional melanocytes—the cells that produce melanin, the natural pigment responsible for skin, hair and eye colour.[1,2,3] It causes pale patches (lesions) that can appear almost anywhere on the body and impacts an estimated 0.5-2.3% of the global population.[3,4,5,6]



Living with vitiligo means living with the visible and invisible impacts, including the psychological, emotional and social toll the condition can take on people's daily lives.[7,8]

The psychological impacts of vitiligo are high but uneven

People with vitiligo are five times more likely to develop depression than the general population.[9,10] A diagnosis of vitiligo increases the risk of developing new-onset depressive disorder by 25% and anxiety disorder by 23% over the following two years, according to a UK population-based study.[11] So while vitiligo may not be life-threatening or as physically painful as other skin conditions, the psychological impact on people living with the condition is profound.[12] Yet, one global study reported only 24.5% of vitiligo patients had been formally diagnosed with depression and 28.8% with anxiety, showing that the mental health impacts of the condition are often under-diagnosed and under-appreciated.[13]

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Vitiligo affects everyone differently. Factors such as skin tone, visible patches, culture, gender and age can shape the impact.

- People with vitiligo aged 18-30 tend to have a lower quality of life and higher rates of depression than older patients.[14,15]
- 22% of adolescent patients experience bullying, abuse or social ostracisation; this increases to 39% for those with facial lesions.[1]
- Some studies report a lower health-related quality of life for women with vitiligo compared to men with the condition.[15]
- In general, people with facial lesions reported lower quality of life and more depressive symptoms.[5]

Mental health comorbidities are common among people with vitiligo

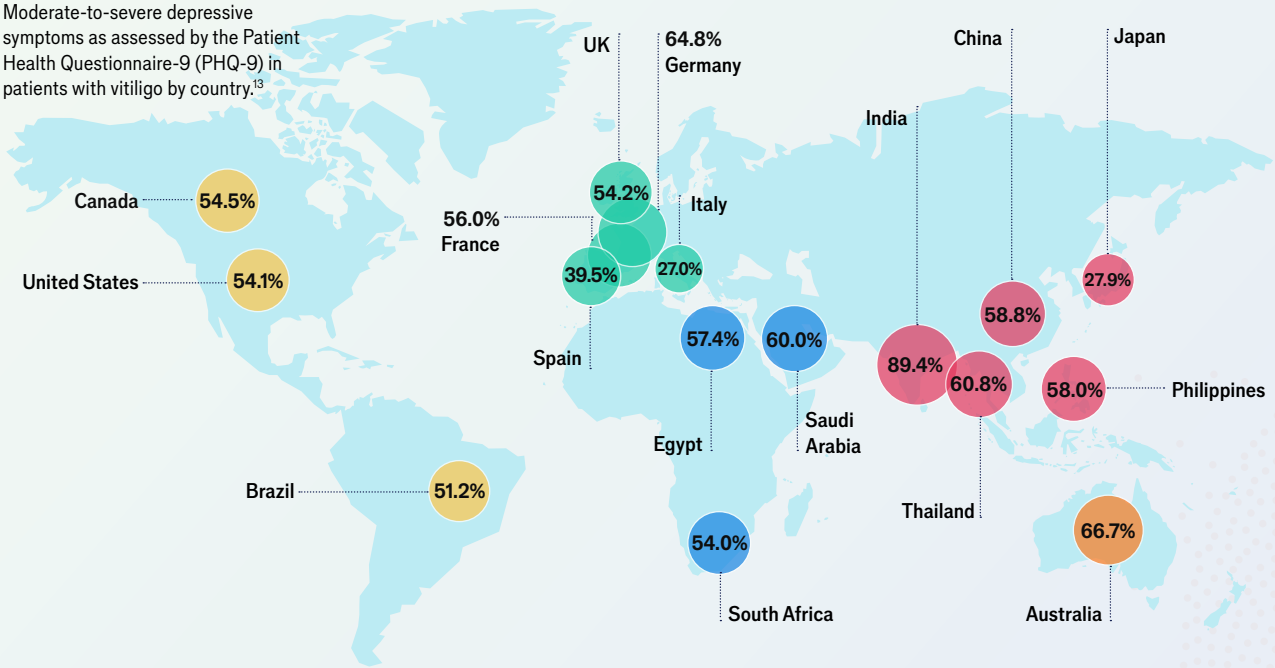
Globally, 55% of people with vitiligo report moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms.[13] But the true impact of depression varies by country.

55%



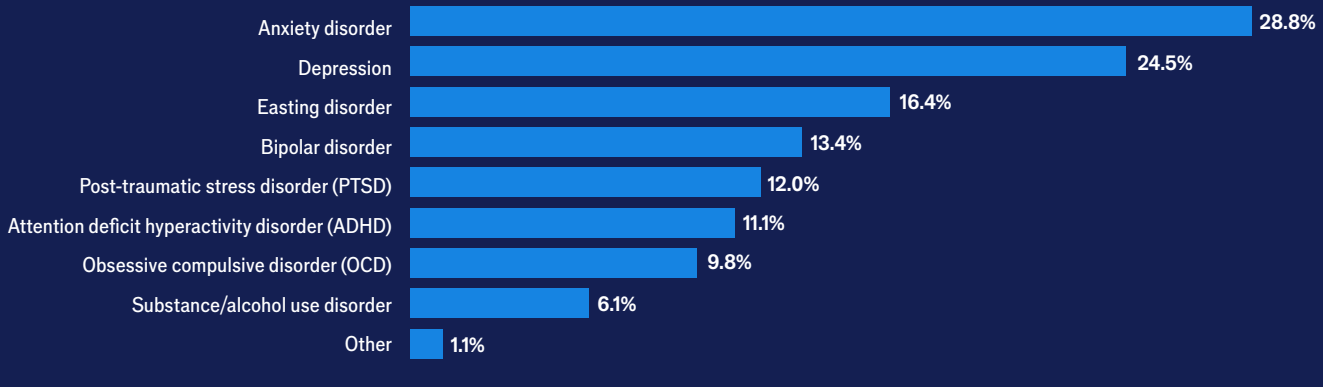
Depressive symptoms in patients with vitiligo

Moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms as assessed by the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) in patients with vitiligo by country.[13]



However, few patients receive a formal diagnosis.[13]

Vitiligo patients with formal mental-health diagnoses.[13]



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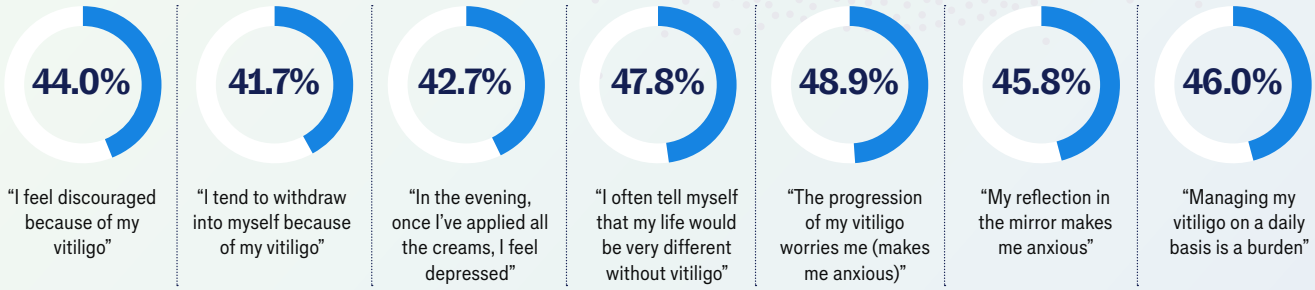
The impact on daily life

The impact of vitiligo on day-to-day life is significant. At least 40% of people with vitiligo globally reported that aspects of their daily lives were affected by their condition.[13] Nearly 60% of people with the disease reported that they frequently concealed the visible signs with make-up, concealer or clothing.[13]

But the disruption is not limited to concealing lesions. Because depigmented skin lacks melanin, it is prone to severe sunburn.[12] This requires people with the condition to be vigilant about sun protection or avoid sun exposure altogether, limiting the amount of time they can safely spend outdoors.[12] For example, US physicians report that 19% of their vitiligo patients avoid sports or other outdoor activities.[1]

People with vitiligo report significant impacts on their mental health and quality of life.

In a global study, people with vitiligo said...[16]



Moments or events that should be effortless—choosing a shirt, attending a party or shaking a colleague's hand—can become daunting, uncomfortable or highly stressful for people living with vitiligo.

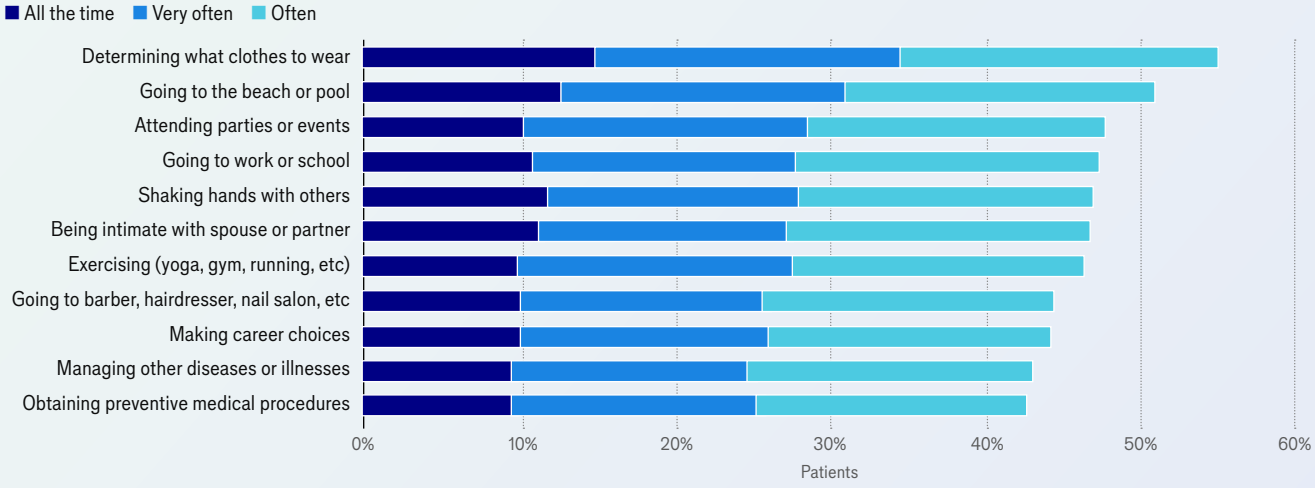
Clothing choices: 55.2% of patients frequently have trouble deciding what clothes to wear because of their condition[13]

Avoiding everyday activities: exercising, going to work or school and attending social events becomes burdensome[13]

Career frustration: 41.9% of patients believe vitiligo has actively hindered their professional progress[13]

Repercussions of vitiligo on patients' daily lives[13]

People with vitiligo reporting how frequently their condition affects the following outcomes



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The social impacts come at a cost, altering relationships and diminishing confidence

Vitiligo has a profound impact on people's confidence and comfort in social situations, affecting not only interactions with new acquaintances but also established friendships, family relationships and intimate partnerships. For many people, concerns about appearance, stigma or unwanted attention can lead to anxiety, avoidance of social situations and, over time, social withdrawal and isolation.[1,12,13]

In a US-based survey, physicians reported that they believed vitiligo had an emotional impact on 47% of their patients and that 44% had low self-esteem as a result of the condition.[1] They also reported social isolation for 21% of their patients, increasing to 31% for people with facial lesions.[1]

Everyday social interactions can be fraught with anxiety. People with vitiligo report that simple actions such as shaking hands or being intimate with a spouse or partner are highly stressful.[13] The fear of being stared at or judged often causes people with the condition to avoid dating, intimacy and meeting new people.[12]

In a survey, US physicians reported that 30% of their patients with vitiligo avoided social situations.[1] Patients report that activities such as going to the beach or pool, attending parties and exercising are highly stressful, which leads them to withdraw socially or completely avoid these settings.[13]

Because the stigma and social isolation associated with vitiligo take a huge toll providing emotional and social support is key to addressing the impact of this condition.

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As of September 2026, Pfizer has no FDA- or EMA-approved treatments for vitiligo.

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This research has been commissioned and funded by Pfizer. Research was conducted by Economist Enterprise, which retained full editorial control of the programme.

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