

Hypopigmentation



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Hypopigmentation

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CRC Press

Taylor & Francis Group

Boca Raton London New York

CRC Press is an imprint of the
Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

CRC Press
Taylor & Francis Group
6000 Broken Sound Parkway NW, Suite 300
Boca Raton, FL 33487-2742

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Printed on acid-free paper

International Standard Book Number-13: 978-1-138-50523-0 (Hardback)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nicolaidou, Electra, editor. | Dessinioti, Clio, editor. | Katsambas, A. D. (Andreas D.), 1944- editor.
Title: Hypopigmentation / [edited by] Electra Nicolaidou, Clio Dessinioti, Andreas Katsambas.
Description: New York, NY : CRC Press/Taylor & Francis Group, [2020] |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019015583 | ISBN 9781138505230 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315146454 (ebook)
Subjects: | MESH: Hypopigmentation | Vitiligo | Skin Diseases
Classification: LCC RL790 | NLM WR 265 | DDC 616.5/5--dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019015583>

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<http://www.crcpress.com>

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Preface

The skin is the most visible organ, and dyschromias and disorders of pigmentation may be a common cause of significant psychological burden in affected individuals. Hypopigmentation of the skin is characterized clinically by areas of “off-white” color that is lighter compared to the surrounding normal skin, or by areas of complete loss of pigmentation characterized by absolute white color. Hypopigmentation may reflect cutaneous diseases such as vitiligo or mosaic or post-inflammatory hypopigmentation, or be a marker of underlying systemic disorders and complex genetic syndromes including tuberous sclerosis, albinism, piebaldism, Waardenburg syndrome, and other rare disorders. Moreover, hypopigmentation may be a sign of cutaneous T-cell lymphoma or be induced by drugs, including cancer immunotherapy such as anti-PD-1 agents.

This comprehensive illustrated text from international experts aims to enable clinicians to diagnose and treat the full range of these conditions in children and in adults by discussing detailed clinical clues and presenting signs and explaining the approach to management.

We want to thank all our co-authors for their work and CRC Press/Taylor & Francis and Robert Peden, for their support.

This book is dedicated by all three of us to our families for their patience, support, and thoughtfulness.

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EVOLUTION/ADAPTATION OF HUMAN PIGMENTATION AND ITS HETEROGENEITY

Melanocytes participate as the major performers in the complex scenario of biological components regulating the process of pigmentation. These cells are specialized in the synthesis of melanin pigments inside membrane-bound organelles, the melanosomes. Along with hemoglobin and carotenoids, melanin is the main pigment responsible for the color variations of our skin and hair. Differences in skin and hair color are considered to be adaptive responses and to be highly related to ultraviolet (UV) exposure and latitude. During evolution, human ancestors living in equatorial Africa were probably characterized by light pigmentation of the body, which was, however, covered by dark hair. The gradual loss of body hair paralleled the increase in the epidermal and stratum corneum thickness and in dark-photoprotective eumelanin pigmentation to prevent the damages of ultraviolet radiation (UVR) near the equator. Under intense UVR exposure, dark skin developed as a protective mechanism to limit destruction of cutaneous and systemic folate. Folate regulates important biological processes such as DNA synthesis, repair, methylation, and maintenance of active spermatogenesis, as well as melanin production. Folate deficiency has been linked to pregnancy complications and severe fetal abnormalities in neural tube development. The sensitivity of folate and of its main serum form, 5-methyltetrahydrofolate, to be degraded by UVR and reactive oxygen species (ROS) supports the hypothesis according to which the increased pigmentation occurring in high UVR-exposed terrestrial areas evolved to prevent fertility reduction caused by folate photodegradation. As hominins gradually moved outside of tropical latitudes, toward Eurasia, the Americas, and nonequatorial Africa, the intensity and duration patterns of UV exposure decreased together with a reduced potential for vitamin D production, thus favoring the promotion of depigmentation. Therefore, the wide array of pigmentation characterizing modern humans seems to be guided on the one hand by the need

to promote photoprotection near the equator (stimulating the dark constitutive pigmentation) and on the other to promote the ultraviolet B (UVB)-induced photosynthesis of vitamin D at the poles (stimulating light constitutive pigmentation).¹⁻³ On the other hand, the evolution of epidermal pigmentation has been also proposed as a protective strategy against UV-mediated damages to the skin permeability barrier and as a defense against the high water loss occurring in desiccating external environments such as the sub-Saharan African regions. In support of this hypothesis, in comparison to lightly pigmented individuals, darkly skinned people show a more acidic pH of the stratum corneum, which is further acidified by the slow and delayed degradation/extrusion of melanin. It has been also theorized that the melanocytes of darkly skinned people secrete paracrine mediators able to stimulate epidermal differentiation and the production of lipids positively involved in the constitution of the skin barrier, thus efficiently improving barrier competence in dark skin. Moreover, a pigmented epidermis displays enhanced antimicrobial defense, a property strictly co-regulated and interconnected with permeability barrier homeostasis.⁴⁻⁶

Melanocytes originate from neural crest multipotent precursors and after steps of migration, proliferation, and differentiation finally settle into epidermis and hair follicles as well as extracutaneous sites, for example, mucosa, cardiovascular system, adipose tissue, cochlea, and choroid.⁷⁻⁹ In the skin, they differentiate into dendritic pigment-producing melanocytes (Figure 1.1) and are distributed among keratinocytes of the epidermal basal layer and in hair follicles (Figure 1.2). Synthesized melanin primarily aims at protecting from the harmful effects of UV radiation derived from sunlight as well as, nowadays, from indoor tanning apparatuses, thanks to its ability to absorb UVR and damaging free radicals. The tanning response and the resulting promotion of pigmentation constitute the main protective mechanisms activated following acute and chronic UV exposure by melanocytes and the skin in its entirety.

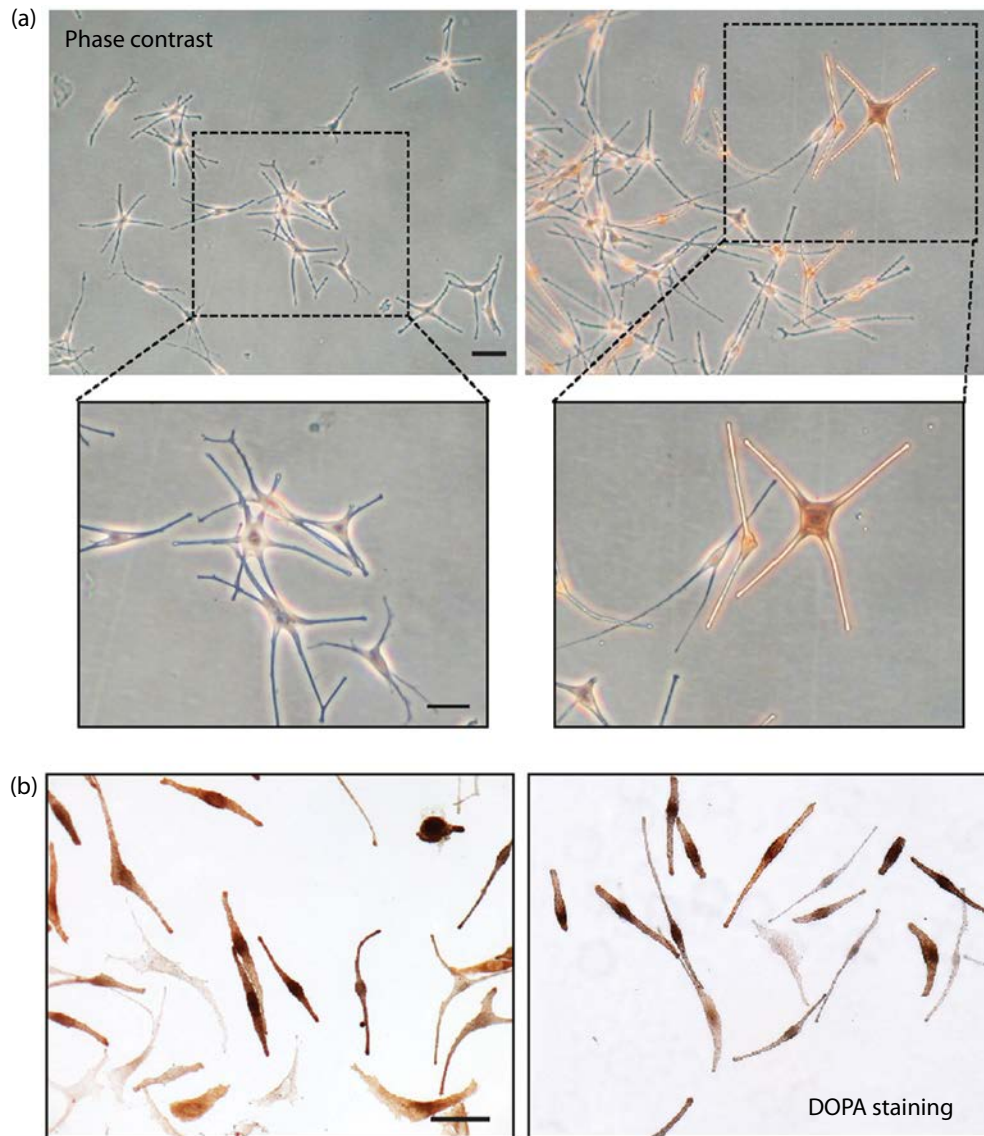


Figure 1.1 (a) Phase contrast microscopic analysis of primary cultures of normal human melanocytes showing the typical dendritic shape. (b) DOPA staining of human primary melanocytes displaying the cellular brown/black appearance due to the activity of tyrosinase on DOPA substrate. Scale bar: a, b: 50 μm .

Melanocytes actively interact with both epidermal and dermal compartments. Each melanocyte, through its dendrites, is in mutual connection with about 30–40 keratinocytes, constituting the epidermal melanin unit (Figure 1.3), and with dermal fibroblasts, thus establishing a finely balanced network of cell–cell crosstalk, ultimately influencing the color of the skin. Differentiated melanocytes display a low growth rate and elevated resistance to apoptosis as a result of their high intrinsic expression of the anti-apoptotic protein Bcl-2.¹⁰ Despite variations in the density of melanocytic cells in diverse body areas, their overall number appears constant among human populations. Differences in ethnic color are rather related to the type and quantity of produced melanin and to its transfer, distribution pattern, and degradation into neighboring keratinocytes. There

are two main types of melanin synthesized through the multistep process of melanogenesis: red/yellow pheomelanin and brown/black or dark eumelanin, which are both produced in different ratios. In light-skinned people, the predominant melanin type is usually pheomelanin, the melanosomes are smaller and less condensed, and they are transferred to keratinocytes grouped in membrane-bound clusters containing four to eight melanosomes.^{11,12} As light keratinocytes terminally differentiate, melanosome structures are fully degraded in the upper epidermal layers.¹¹ Differently, in dark-skinned people, eumelanin is the main produced melanin type, and melanosomes are larger and more copious but singularly packaged and transferred into the surrounding keratinocytes, where their degradation and disappearance are slower¹³ (Figure 1.4).

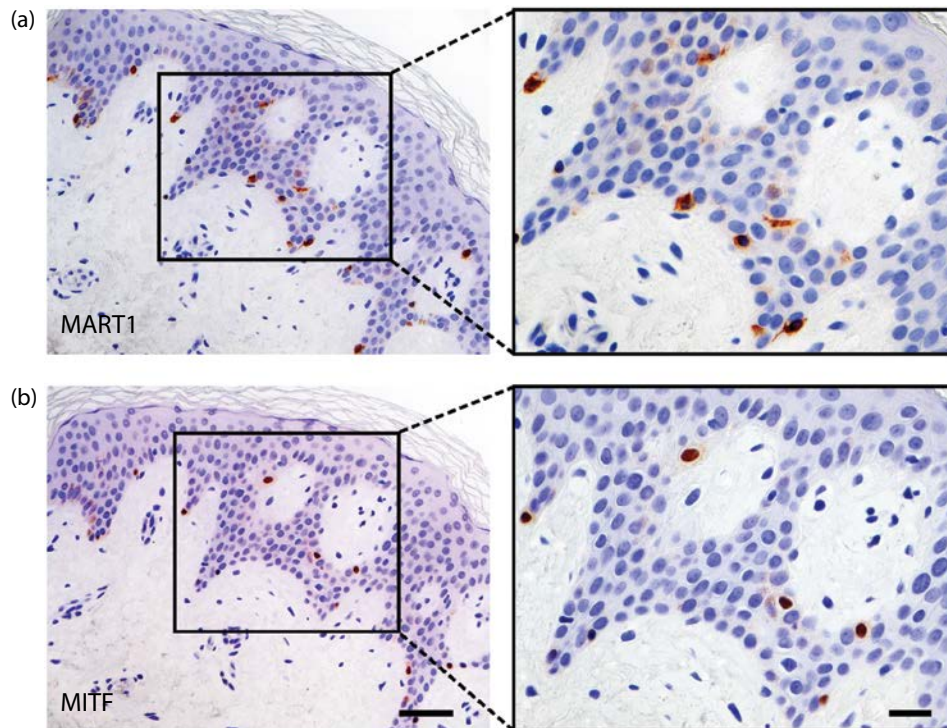


Figure 1.2 Serial sections of a skin specimen showing the presence of melanocytes identified using the melanocyte markers MART1 (melanoma antigen recognized by T cells 1) (melanosome structural protein) (a), and MITF (microphthalmia-associated transcription factor) (b). Nuclei are counterstained with hematoxylin. Right panels represent higher-magnification images of the black boxed areas. Scale bar: Left panels: 50 μm ; higher-magnification images on the right panels: 20 μm .

MELANOCYTES AND MELANIN SYNTHESIS

A decisive aspect in determining skin color is the type of melanin synthesized by melanocytes. Melanin synthesis occurs within specialized membrane-bound organelles, the melanosomes, through four stages of maturation. Melanin arrangement inside melanosomes guarantees the protection of other cell compartments from oxidative stress produced during pigment synthesis and, at the same time, condensates melanin for its transfer to keratinocytes.¹⁴ While maturing, melanosomes progressively acquire structural and enzymatic proteins, allowing them to produce pigment. At stage I, melanosomes appear as round vesicles without structural

constituents. Progressing to stage II, they assemble into elongated fibrillar organelles containing structural (e.g., Pmel17—melanosomal matrix protein 17, also known as PMEL, SILV, gp100) and enzymatic proteins (tyrosinase), but they still lack pigment. Then, melanin synthesis begins and the produced pigment is placed on internal fibrils (stage III). At stage IV, melanosomes are mature and fully melanized. They are deprived of tyrosinase activity and are transferred along dendrites and then to the surrounding keratinocytes.¹² Within melanosomes, melanin synthesis occurs through a sequence of reactions guided by the coordinate actions of crucial enzymes, namely tyrosinase, tyrosinase-related protein 1 (TYRP-1),

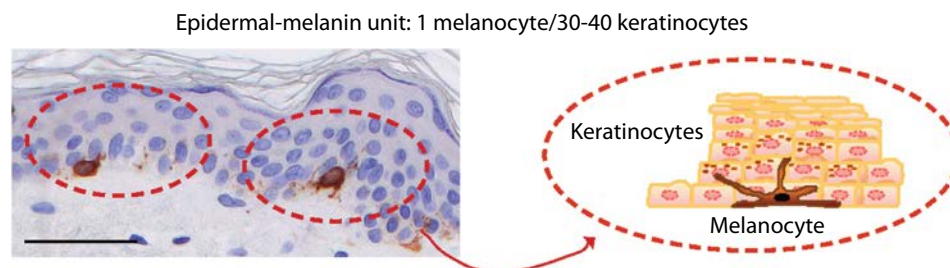


Figure 1.3 The epidermal-melanin unit showing the interactions between melanocytes and the surrounding keratinocytes. Left panel: Detection of melanocytes on a section of a skin specimen by immunohistochemical analysis of the expression of MART1. Scale bar: 50 μm .

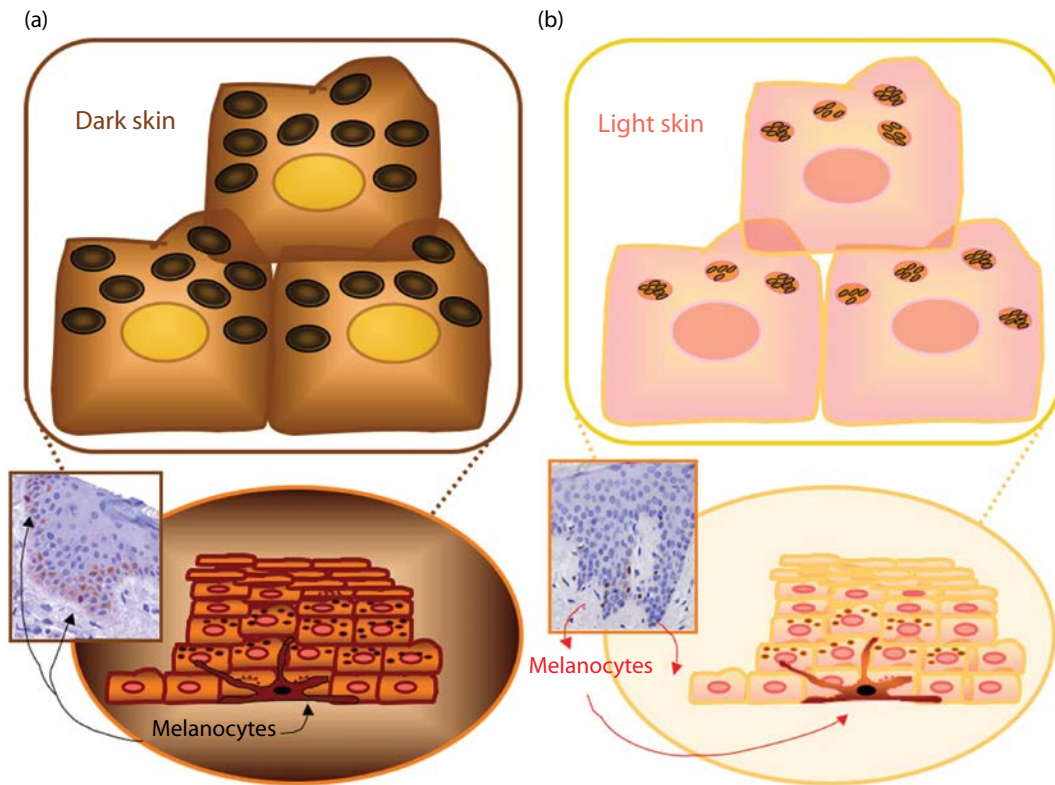


Figure 1.4 Pigmentation in dark and light skin. In dark-skinned people (left panel, a), melanosomes are large, abundant, and transferred to keratinocytes as singly packaged organelles. In light-skinned individuals (right panel, b), melanosomes are small, less matured, and transferred to keratinocytes as clusters in membrane-bound organelles, encompassing more melanosomes. Insert in a: immunohistochemical analysis of the expression of the melanocyte marker MITF in a darkly pigmented skin specimen. Arrows indicate stained melanocytes. Melanin pigment is observable inside basal and suprabasal keratinocytes. Insert in b: immunohistochemical analysis of the expression of the melanocyte marker MITF in a lightly pigmented skin specimen. Arrows indicate stained melanocytes.

and tyrosinase-related protein 2/dopachrome tautomerase (TYRP-2, DCT). The cooperation of these three enzymes leads to the production of two main melanin-type biopolymers: red-yellow pheomelanin and brown-black eumelanin. Melanogenic enzyme functionality and substrate obtainability drive the type of melanins produced. Tyrosinase governs the initial synthesis steps, hydroxylating L-tyrosine to L-3,4-dihydroxyphenylalanine (L-DOPA) (the earliest melanogenesis rate restricting step) and subsequently oxidizing DOPA to DOPAquinone. At this point, when sulfhydryl groups such as L-cysteine are available, dopaquinone reacts with them, forming cysteinylDOPA isomers, including 5-S-cysteinylDOPA and 2-S-cysteinylDOPA. They are hence oxidized and polymerize, producing pheomelanins via benzothiazine intermediates. As sulfhydryl groups are not available, dopaquinone is spontaneously subjected to cyclization and rearrangement to DOPochrome. DOPochrome spontaneously decarboxylates into 5, 6 dihydroxyindole (DHI), forming, by rapid oxidation and polymerization, dark brown-black insoluble DHI-melanin. In the presence of the enzymatic protein dopachrome tautomerase (TYRP2, DCT), dopachrome will generate DHI-2-carboxylic-acid (DHICA). TYRP1 catalyzes further

DHICA oxidation and polymerization, leading to light-brown, fairly soluble DHICA eumelanin¹⁵ (Figures 1.5 and 1.6). Eumelanin is prevalent in dark-skinned/black-haired individuals and protects from UV damage. Pheomelanin, which is higher in people with fair skin and red hair, generates an increased amount of free radicals, thus inducing more harmful effects. Several genes involved in melanin synthesis and melanosome formation, as well as in pigment trafficking inside melanocytes and melanin transfer to keratinocytes, decisively influence the variations in pigmentation observed among human populations. Multiple genes are known to directly or indirectly impact pigmentation, and mutations of many of these genes may lead to pigmentary disorders, either as hyper- or hypopigmentation.^{16,17}

MELANOSOME TRANSPORT INSIDE MELANOCYTES AND MELANOSOME TRANSFER TO KERATINOCYTES

As melanosomes differentiate, they progressively move from the melanocyte perinuclear area to the dendrite tips. Melanosome intracellular movement occurs both antero- and retrogradely, toward microtubule proteins belonging to the kinesin and dynein/dynein-associated protein superfamilies, respectively. In the dendrites,

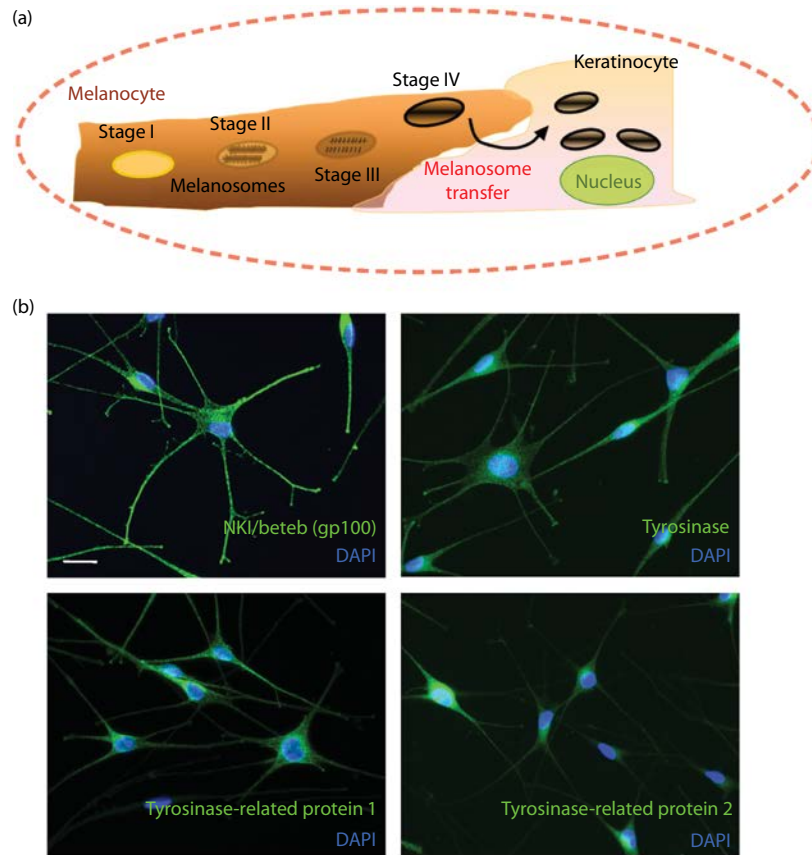


Figure 1.5 (a) Cartoon depicting the four stages of melanosome maturation within melanocytes. While maturing, melanosomes acquire the structural and enzymatic components necessary to produce melanin. (b) Immunofluorescence analysis of the expression of the structural melanosome-associated protein NKIbeteb/gp100 and of the enzymatic proteins tyrosinase, tyrosinase-related protein 1, and tyrosinase-related protein 2 in human primary melanocytes. Nuclei are counterstained with 4',6'-diamidino-2 phenylindole (DAPI). Scale bar: 20 μ m.

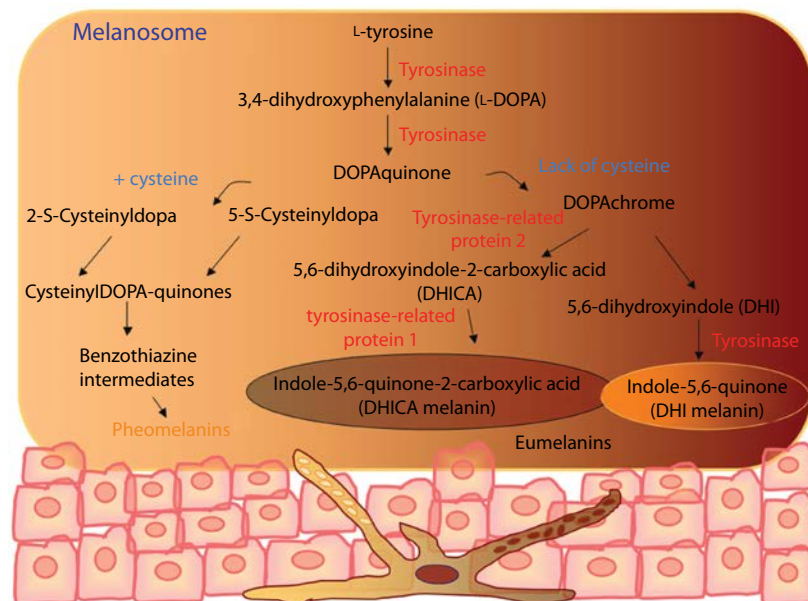


Figure 1.6 Melanin biosynthetic pathway. Two major melanin forms are synthesized within melanosomes: red-yellow pheomelanin and brown-black eumelanin.

melanosomes are then connected with peripheral actin filaments by a tripartite complex composed of the small GTPase Rab27a, its effector protein melanophilin, and the actin motor myosin Va, allowing their detachment from the microtubules and their settling close to the plasma membrane.^{18,19} From the tips of the dendrites, fully melanized melanosomes are transferred to the neighboring keratinocytes, where they distribute as a supra-nuclear cap, aiming at protecting cell nuclei from the damaging effects of UV. Based on *in vitro* and ultrastructural studies, different models of melanosome intercellular transfer, which are not incompatible with each other, have been hypothesized: (i) Exocytosis of naked melanin (also referred to as melanocore) into the extracellular areas through the fusion of the melanocyte plasma- and melanosome membranes. The pigment particles are then taken up by the surrounding keratinocytes via phagocytosis. (ii) Cytophagocytosis: keratinocytes internalize melanocyte dendrite tips via phagocytosis. Subsequent fusion of lysosomes and dissolution of the melanosome membrane lead to the formation of phagolysosomes. The latter are then gradually degraded in vesicles containing melanin granules spread in the cytoplasm of keratinocytes. Filopodial phagocytosis, in which melanocyte filopodia containing melanosomes are phagocytosed by keratinocytes, has been also reported. (iii) Membrane fusion: melanosomes proceed via a thin, transient channel derived from the

fusion of melanocyte-keratinocyte plasma membranes. Melanosome transfer by the fusion model has been also suggested to occur via melanocyte filopodia united with keratinocyte plasma membrane to form a tubular structure of actin filaments. (iv) Transfer through membrane-bound vesicles: melanocytes release membrane vesicles containing melanosomes, which are then phagocytosed by keratinocytes.²⁰⁻²²

Keratinocytes, for their part, actively participate in regulating the process of melanosome uptake. The expression of specific receptors on keratinocytes, but not on melanocytes, positively controls melanosome internalization. Among them, the G-protein-coupled protease-activated receptor 2 (PAR-2) is decisive in melanosome uptake by stimulating the process of phagocytosis. PAR-2 receptors are activated by proteolytic cleavage of their extracellular N-terminal domain via serine proteases. The cleavage discloses tethered ligands that bind the receptor, thus inducing its activation. Once activated, PAR-2 increases melanosome internalization by a Rho-dependent mechanism.^{23,24} PAR-2 expression and activity are upregulated following UV²⁵ and are also correlated with skin color, showing more elevated levels with respect to lightly pigmented skin.²⁶ Melanosome transfer is also stimulated by the expression and activation of the keratinocyte growth factor receptor (KGFR) in early differentiated keratinocytes, where the levels of the receptor are increased. KGFR directly promotes the phagocytic process^{27,28} (Figure 1.7).

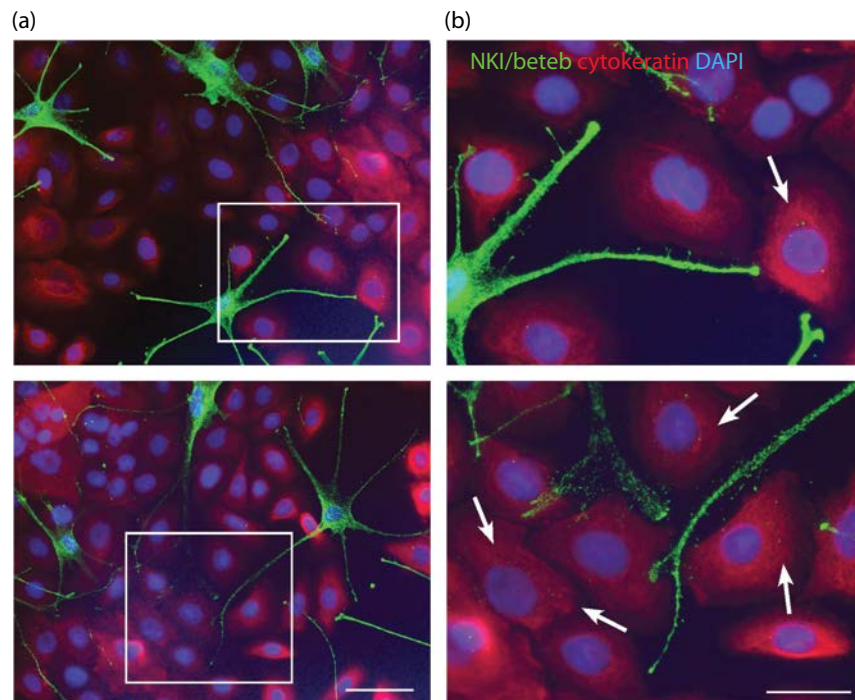


Figure 1.7 Double immunofluorescence staining of human primary melanocyte-keratinocyte co-cultures with anti-NKI-beteb antibody (green signal) to stain melanosomes and with anti-cytokeratin antibody (red signal) to detect keratinocytes. Intracytoplasmic dots positively stained for NKI-beteb are detectable in keratinocytes (white arrows), evidencing melanosome transfer. The images in (b) represent higher magnification of the boxed areas in (a). Scale bar: 50 μm .

CELL-CELL CROSSTALK IN THE CONTROL OF MELANOCYTE FUNCTIONALITY

Melanocyte homeostasis is guided by the active signaling crosstalk established with the surrounding epidermal and dermal microenvironment via secreted factors and intercellular connections.

Melanocyte-keratinocyte interactions

Keratinocytes impact melanocyte functions through adhesion molecules and an inter/intracellular network of paracrine/autocrine bioactive messengers, whose physiological release is upregulated in response to external triggers, first UV exposure and/or also inflammatory stimuli. Binding to their specific receptors, keratinocyte-derived mediators activate intracellular signaling pathways controlling the growth, survival, differentiation, and pigment synthesis of melanocytic cells.

Among these growth factor/receptor axes, the pro-opiomelanocortin (POMC) cleavage peptides alpha-melanocyte stimulating hormone (α -MSH) and adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), via signaling through the G protein-coupled receptor melanocortin 1 receptor (MC1R), are key players in the induction of melanocyte differentiation and melanin synthesis. Activation of MC1R through cAMP-dependent signaling promotes the upregulation of the transcription factor microphthalmia-associated transcription factor (MITF). MITF is considered a crucial transcription factor for melanocyte functions (Figure 1.8), regulating the transcription of pigmentation-related genes (e.g., tyrosinase, TYRP-1, TYRP-2, PMEL, MART1), thus promoting melanocyte differentiation, as well as genes linked to survival (e.g., Bcl-2), cell cycle, and metabolism (e.g., CDK2).²⁹ Through the induction of MITF and, consequently, the pigmentation-related genes, MC1R regulates the production of eu- versus pheomelanin. Activating the receptor by agonists such as α -MSH or ACTH, the production of eumelanin is stimulated. Differently, the action of an antagonist, for example, Agouti signaling protein, may lead to the synthesis of pheomelanin. MC1R variants with a weak functionality are observed in fair-skinned/red-haired people, who are

characterized by a prevalence of pheomelanin, a feeble potential for tanning, and increased risk for melanoma and nonmelanoma skin cancers.³⁰ Upon UV exposure, direct transcriptional activation of POMC/ α -MSH occurs in keratinocytes by the tumor-suppressor protein p53,³¹ thus promoting melanocyte functions. Besides its central role in regulating pigmentation, MC1R influences several other processes, not only in melanocytes but also in the skin microenvironment in its entirety, maintaining genomic integrity, controlling oxidative stress, and promoting the antioxidant defense system.³² Recently, a connection between MC1R and nuclear receptor activation has been described, further underlying the multitude of functions guided by MC1R in cells and tissues. α -MSH has been shown to activate the nuclear receptor peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor- γ (PPAR- γ) through the induction of the phosphatidylinositol [PI(4,5)P2/PLC β] signal pathway, demonstrating how MC1R has a role in controlling extrapigmentary functions such as proliferation via lipid mediators.^{32,33}

Many other melanocyte mitogen and melanogen factors are produced by keratinocytes, for example, stem cell factor (SCF), endothelin-1 (ET-1), basic fibroblast growth factor (bFGF/FGF2), granulocyte-macrophage colony-stimulating factor (GM-CSF), and hepatocyte growth factor (HGF). As for α -MSH, the synthesis of most of them is significantly increased following UV irradiation. ET-1 acts, binding to endothelin receptor type B (EDNRB), promoting melanocyte growth and melanogenesis.³⁴ The SCF/c-kit tyrosine kinase receptor axis favors melanocyte survival and melanin production.³⁵ Comparable to POMC, the transcription and synthesis of both ET-1 and SCF are stimulated by p53.³⁶ Along with growth factors, other mediators released by keratinocytes in the course of biological processes such as inflammation or wound healing may function as activators of melanocytes. Among them, the arachidonic acid-derived lipid molecules prostaglandins E2 and F2a stimulate melanocyte dendricity and melanogenesis.³⁷ Keratinocytes secrete also nerve growth factor (NGF), which is implicated in melanocyte dendrite formation and melanin synthesis, survival, and migration.³⁸ In

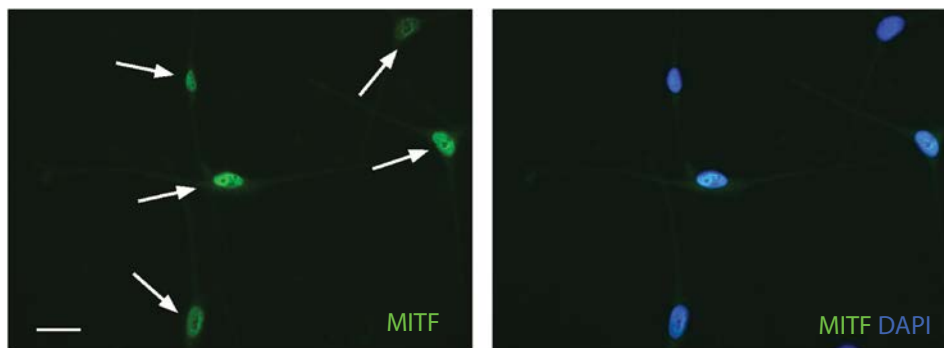


Figure 1.8 Immunofluorescence analysis of MITF expression (white arrows) in primary cultures of human melanocytes. Nuclei are counterstained with DAPI. Scale bar: 20 μ m.

the finely balanced crosstalk between keratinocytes and melanocytes, alongside messengers acting as positive inducers of the functionality of the latter, keratinocytes also release some inhibiting factors. TGF- β inhibits melanocyte proliferation, differentiation, and melanin synthesis. The production of TGF- β in keratinocytes is suppressed upon UV exposure, and such an event allows the upregulation of the transcription factor SOX3 in melanocytes, thus stimulating the pigmentation process.³⁹ Keratinocytes, as well as melanocytes themselves, express bone morphogenic proteins (BMPs), signaling molecules belonging to the TGF β 1 superfamily. Among them, BMP-4 is able to inhibit melanogenesis, decreasing tyrosinase expression. On the contrary, BMP-6 acts in the opposite way, stimulating melanin synthesis through the induction of tyrosinase expression and activity, together with melanin transfer from melanocytes to keratinocytes.^{40,41} Following UV exposure, keratinocytes are also stimulated to synthesize the cytokine interferon gamma (IFN- γ), which exerts an inhibitory effect on pigmentation, decreasing the expression of enzymes deputed to melanin biosynthesis, thus impeding melanosome maturation.⁴² Additional keratinocyte-derived cytokines with downregulating effects on melanization and melanocyte proliferation are interleukin 6 (IL-6), interleukin 1 alpha (IL-1 α), and tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF- α)⁴³ (Figure 1.9a).

Melanocyte-fibroblast interactions

Dermal fibroblasts play an active role in modulating melanocyte homeostasis through the secretion of growth factors and cytokines, which act both in a synergistic and sometimes overlapping fashion with respect to the keratinocyte-mediated signaling network. Additionally, some paracrine messengers released by fibroblasts can indirectly target melanocyte functions, inducing the production of biofactors able to either block or stimulate melanocyte activities in keratinocytes. Similar to growth factors and cytokines synthesized by keratinocytes, in this intricate epithelial-mesenchymal interaction, some fibroblastic bioactive messengers act as melanocyte activators, others as inhibitors. The physiological hypopigmented phenotype of the palms and soles has been attributed to increased expression of the Wnt pathway antagonist dickkopf1 (DKK1) in these body areas. This site-specific fibroblast-derived factor exerts a dual action: on the one hand, it suppresses melanocyte growth and melanin synthesis, and on the other, it acts on keratinocytes, decreasing the expression of the proteinase-activated receptor 2 actively involved in the process of melanosome transfer.⁴⁴ Furthermore, fibroblasts share with keratinocytes the production of TGF- β , with repressive properties on melanocytes.³⁹ However, the largest number of fibroblast-derived messengers exert a positive action on melanocyte activities, acting on their growth, survival, migration, and pigment production. Some of these pro-pigmenting mediators are also produced by epidermal cells, for example, SCF, HGF, and bFGF;

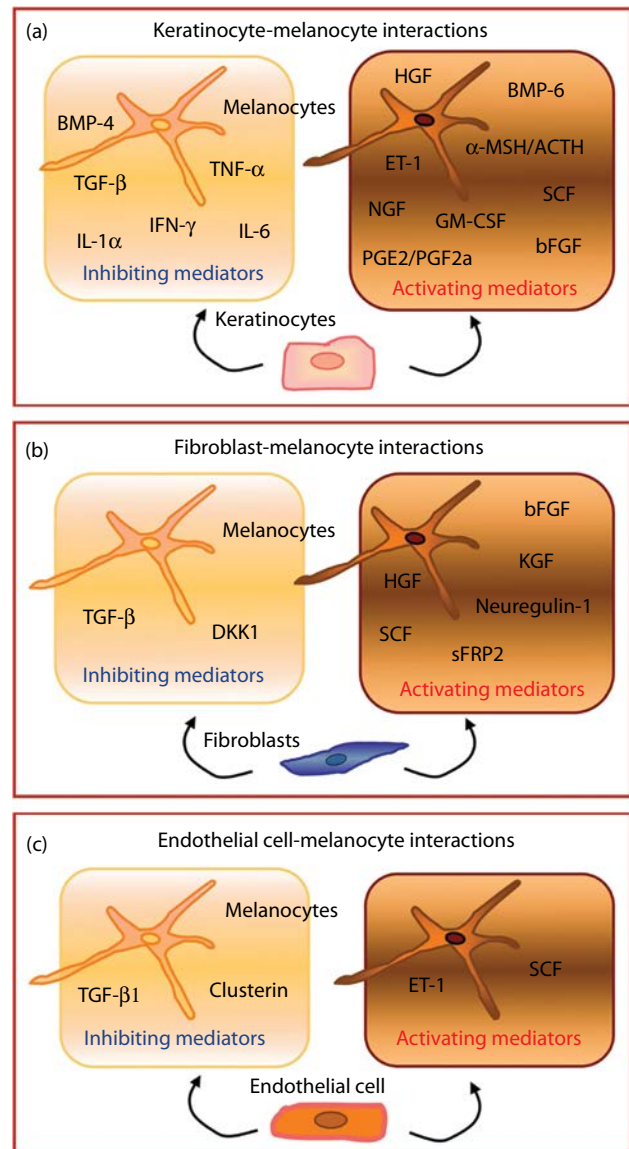


Figure 1.9 Summary of the stimulating and inhibiting bioactive mediators involved in the regulation of melanocyte functionalities. (a) Keratinocyte-derived messengers. (b) Fibroblast-derived messengers. (c) Endothelial cell-derived messengers.

others are exclusively of fibroblastic origin. Among the latter, neuregulin-1 has been demonstrated to be highly expressed in fibroblasts of type VI skin, where it positively participates in the regulation of constitutive pigmentation of darker skin.⁴⁵ Keratinocyte growth factor (KGF) belongs to the family of fibroblast growth factors and represents a further mesenchymal-specific pro-pigmenting paracrine mediator. KGF directly promotes melanosome transfer via activation of its receptor KGFR in keratinocytes. Additionally, it upregulates the synthesis and release of SCF from keratinocytes, thus indirectly promoting melanocyte pro-pigmenting and pro-growing activities. It has been also demonstrated that the treatment with KGF alone or in combination with IL-1 α increases melanin production and

deposition in pigmented epidermal equivalents and human skin explants.^{27,46,47} The Wnt modulator secreted frizzled-related protein 2 (sFRP2) has been recently discovered as a further fibroblast-secreted stimulating factor, thanks to its ability to increase the expression levels of MITF and tyrosinase through beta catenin signaling⁴⁸ (Figure 1.9b).

Melanocyte-endothelial cell interactions

In the complex scenario of the epidermal-dermal interactions emerging as crucially involved in mediating melanocyte homeostasis under both physiological and pathological conditions, several reports have now been focused on the epithelial/endothelial cell-cell interplay. However, contradictory effects are reported in the literature, showing both positive and negative regulatory abilities of vascular endothelial cells on the process of pigmentation. A stimulatory effect of endothelial cell-derived ET-1 on melanogenesis, via the signaling pathway of the EDNRB on melanocytes, has been reported.⁴⁹ On the other hand, subsequent studies demonstrated the ability of endothelial cells to inhibit pigmentation via the secretion of high amounts of TGF- β 1 and/or clusterin, which downregulate MITF and tyrosinase, thus keeping the level of produced pigment low.^{50,51} Interestingly, upon UV irradiation, endothelial cells are activated to secrete increased levels of SCF, responsible for the paracrine stimulation of melanocytes and consequently increasing skin pigmentation⁵² (Figure 1.9c).

EXTRACELLULAR MATRIX MICROENVIRONMENT AND MELANOCYTE HOMEOSTASIS

The epidermal and dermal extracellular matrix (ECM) microenvironment influences a large number of skin functions, for example, cell-cell crosstalk, adhesion, support, and migration. Dynamic interplays among extracellular matrix proteins, cells, and bioactive mediators are also critical regulators of melanocyte activities and cutaneous pigmentation. Early studies demonstrated the ability of several ECM proteins derived from dermal fibroblasts and endothelial cells (e.g., collagen I, collagen IV, fibronectin) to increase proliferation and tyrosinase activity in melanocytes cultured in media lacking mitogens.⁵³ More recently, the keratinocyte-derived ECM factor laminin-332 has been shown to promote the adhesion and migration of melanocytes,⁵⁴ as well as the synthesis of melanin by stimulating the extracellular uptake of the pigment precursor tyrosine.⁵⁵ ECM components also constitute a reservoir for cytokines and growth factors, thus regulating their local amount and activity. For instance, an uncontrolled degradation of heparan sulfate at the dermal-epidermal junction, as happens for the activation of heparanase following UV exposure, may result in excessive diffusion through the basement membrane of heparin-binding growth factors, such as the pro-pigmenting factors HGF and FGFs. Consequently, the uncontrolled propagation of growth factors and cytokines among the epidermis and dermis may inappropriately activate melanocytes.⁵⁶

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the relatively low number of melanocytes distributed throughout the epidermis in comparison to their neighboring keratinocytes, these cells represent intriguing and master players in the control of a multitude of cutaneous biological functions. Melanocyte homeostasis has been guided, over time, by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors (above all, UV exposure) that have contributed and are still contributing to the development and evolution of the pigmentary system. All these influences create an intricate and finely balanced signaling crosstalk, in which melanocytes exert a central and dynamic role in controlling the equilibrium and protection of the skin in its entirety. On the other hand, the network of bioactive messengers acts bidirectionally to and from the melanocytes toward the other dermal and epidermal cells. As a result, this mutual interaction confers on the whole cutaneous microenvironment the ability to strongly influence melanocytes themselves and therefore to contribute to both constitutive pigmentation and, whenever altered, to the onset and persistence of pigmentary disorders.

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