

What is a birthmark?

A birthmark is any area of discoloured skin present from birth or very soon after birth and persists for at least several months. The common type of birthmark is called a naevus. The naevus is usually a collection of tiny blood vessels in the skin (called a vascular naevus) or a collection of dark pigment (called a pigmented naevus).

The three common types of vascular naevi are the 'stork bite', the strawberry naevus and the 'port wine stain'.

The 'stork mark'

The proper medical name for the so called 'stork mark or bite' is *Naevus flammeus*. It is a flat red or pink patch of dilated capillaries that appears on the nape of the neck or on the face, especially on the eyelids, the bridge of the nose and adjacent forehead.

Stork marks (sometimes called salmon patches) are very common and may occur in up to 50% of babies. They are present at birth and usually fade away over the next 6 to 18 months although the neck patches may persist well into adult life. No treatment is required.

The strawberry naevus

The proper medical name for a strawberry naevus is *haemangioma of infancy*. It is a very bright red raised area that can occur on any part of the body. At birth it is so small (it may be the size of a pinhead); that it is not noticed for a few days then it grows rapidly for a few weeks, increasing in size up to 20 weeks in proportion to the growth of the baby. When the baby is about 6 months small white-grey areas appear in the naevus and gradually spread to eventually replace the red tissue so that the lump becomes flatter and smaller.

The naevus usually disappears substantially by the time the child reaches 4 years or school age and completely by about 8 years of age. Occasionally the naevus may bleed either following a knock or spontaneously, but applying firm pressure with a finger over a small dressing usually stops the bleeding. In most cases no treatment is required.

Sometimes if the naevus is large and disfiguring on the face or interfering with orifices such as the eye, ear or genitals, your doctor will refer the child to a specialist clinic for treatment.

The port wine stain

The proper medical term for this is *capillary malformation* because it is a patchwork of tiny swollen capillaries which appear as a purplish-red discoloration anywhere on the body, especially on the face and limbs. About 1 in 1000 babies will be born with the stain. It may not be obvious at birth and so may not be diagnosed for several weeks. With time the stain becomes raised and thicker but it does not grow in size except in proportion to body growth. It usually persists into adult life and remains unchanged although it may fade slightly. In the past it was difficult to treat or remove and cosmetic creams were used to conceal the stain. Now it can be treated (best in the first 2 years) by specialised laser treatment.

Pigmented birthmarks

A pigmented birthmark is a discolouration on the surface of the skin due to a dark pigment called melanin. It is usually seen as a flat coffee- or black-coloured spot. The correct medical term is a *melanocytic* (or *pigmented*) *naevus* or *mole*. One child in 100 is born with a pigmented birthmark. Nearly all children will develop them after the age of 2 and it must be emphasised that they are usually completely harmless. As a rule the birthmark becomes more raised and perhaps hairy as the child grows.

Generally there are only one or two small spots but in some cases the spots can be many or very large. Some infants are born with pigmented birthmarks that have hair growing out of them. In some older children a halo of paler skin may appear around it which is called a *halo naevus*. The mark may become itchy or swollen from time to time.

Pigmented birthmarks are generally permanent but can be removed by plastic surgery if necessary for cosmetic reasons. This is best done before starting school.