International Journal of Medicine
pISSN 1468-3814 | eISSN 2667-7008
https://theinternationalmedicine.com/

Original Research Article *DOI: 10.61336/im/26-2-12*

Melanin Synthesis and Photoprotection Physiology: An Observational Study of Skin Pigmentation and Ultraviolet Radiation Protection

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Received: **May 01, 2026**
Revised: **May 28, 2026**
Accepted: **June 07, 2026**
Published: **June 19, 2026**

Abstract

Background: Melanin is the primary pigment responsible for skin color and serves as a natural defense mechanism against ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Variations in melanin content influence susceptibility to UV-induced skin damage and photoaging. Objective: To investigate the relationship between melanin synthesis, skin pigmentation, and physiological photoprotection against ultraviolet radiation. ***Materials and Methods:*** A cross-sectional observational study was conducted involving 120 healthy participants aged 18–45 years. Participants were categorized according to Fitzpatrick skin phototypes I–VI. Melanin index was measured using reflectance spectrophotometry, while minimal erythema dose (MED) was determined following controlled UV exposure. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and Pearson correlation tests. ***Results:*** Mean melanin index increased significantly from skin phototype I (21.3 ± 4.2) to phototype VI (86.4 ± 6.7) ($p < 0.001$). MED values increased proportionally with melanin content, demonstrating greater UV resistance among darker skin types. A strong positive correlation was observed between melanin index and MED ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$). ***Conclusion:*** Higher melanin content is associated with enhanced photoprotection and increased resistance to UV-induced erythema. Melanin plays a critical role in maintaining skin integrity through UV absorption and antioxidant activity.

Keywords: Melanin, Melanogenesis, Photoprotection, Ultraviolet Radiation, Skin Pigmentation, Tyrosinase

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INTRODUCTION

Human skin pigmentation is primarily determined by the quantity, type, and distribution of melanin synthesized by melanocytes located within the basal layer of the epidermis. Melanin serves as a biological photoprotective pigment that shields cutaneous tissues from ultraviolet radiation and oxidative stress (1). The process of melanin synthesis, known as melanogenesis, occurs within specialized organelles called melanosomes and involves a series of enzymatic reactions regulated by genetic and environmental factors (2).

The amino acid tyrosine acts as the precursor molecule in melanogenesis. Tyrosinase, the key rate-limiting enzyme, catalyzes the conversion of tyrosine into dihydroxyphenylalanine (DOPA) and subsequently into dopaquinone. Further biochemical reactions result in the formation of eumelanin or pheomelanin depending on intracellular conditions (3). Eumelanin exhibits superior UV-absorbing and antioxidant properties, whereas pheomelanin is less effective and may generate reactive oxygen species under ultraviolet exposure (4).

Exposure to ultraviolet radiation stimulates melanogenesis through activation of the melanocortin-1 receptor (MC1R) pathway. Keratinocytes exposed to UV radiation release α-melanocyte-stimulating hormone (α-MSH), which activates MC1R on melanocytes. This signaling cascade increases cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP) levels and activates microphthalmia-associated transcription factor (MITF), promoting expression of melanogenic enzymes (5).

Photoprotection involves multiple physiological mechanisms. Melanin absorbs ultraviolet photons, dissipates absorbed energy as heat, scavenges reactive oxygen species, and prevents DNA damage by forming supranuclear caps over keratinocyte nuclei (6). Consequently, individuals with higher melanin levels exhibit lower incidences of sunburn, photoaging, and UV-induced skin cancers (7).

Previous studies have demonstrated significant variations in melanin content among different skin

phototypes and ethnic populations (8). However, quantitative assessment of the relationship between melanin synthesis and photoprotection remains an important area of dermatological research. Understanding these mechanisms may contribute to improved strategies for preventing UV-induced skin disorders and developing targeted photoprotective therapies.

The present study aimed to evaluate melanin synthesis and its physiological role in photoprotection by examining the association between melanin index and ultraviolet resistance among individuals with different skin phototypes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional observational study was conducted over six months in the Department of Dermatology and Physiology Research Laboratory.

Study Population

A total of 120 healthy volunteers aged 18–45 years were recruited.

Inclusion Criteria

- Healthy individuals aged 18–45 years.
- No history of chronic dermatological diseases.
- No recent use of skin-lightening or photosensitizing agents.
- Willingness to participate and provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

- History of skin cancer.
- Active dermatological disorders.
- Pregnancy or lactation.
- Systemic diseases affecting pigmentation.

Sample Size

The sample size was calculated using a confidence level of 95% and power of 80%, yielding a minimum requirement of 110 participants. To compensate for attrition, 120 subjects were enrolled.

Skin Phototype Classification

Participants were classified according to the Fitzpatrick skin phototype scale:

- Type I
- Type II
- Type III
- Type IV
- Type V
- Type VI

Twenty participants were included in each category.

Melanin Index Measurement

Melanin content was measured using reflectance spectrophotometry at the inner forearm. Three readings were obtained for each participant, and the mean value was recorded as the melanin index.

Minimal Erythema Dose (MED)

Photoprotection was assessed using MED testing. Incremental UV-B doses were applied to small skin areas, and erythema was evaluated after 24 hours. The minimum UV dose producing visible erythema was recorded.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0.

- Mean ± standard deviation calculated.
- One-way ANOVA used for group comparisons.
- Pearson correlation used to assess associations.
- Significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional ethical approval was obtained before study initiation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 120)

Variable	Frequency (%)
Male	58 (48.3)
Female	62 (51.7)
Age 18–25 years	38 (31.7)
Age 26–35 years	47 (39.2)
Age 36–45 years	35 (29.1)

The study population consisted of nearly equal proportions of males and females, with the majority aged between 26 and 35 years.

Table 2. Mean Melanin Index According to Skin Phototype

Phototype	Mean Melanin Index ± SD
I	21.3 ± 4.2
II	31.7 ± 5.4
III	45.6 ± 6.1
IV	60.8 ± 5.9
V	74.2 ± 6.3
VI	86.4 ± 6.7

ANOVA p-value < 0.001
Melanin index increased progressively across skin phototypes, indicating greater pigmentation in darker skin types.

Table 3. Minimal Erythema Dose (MED) According to Skin Phototype

Phototype	MED (mJ/cm²) Mean ± SD
I	25.8 ± 3.1
II	31.4 ± 3.8
III	39.6 ± 4.2
IV	48.2 ± 4.6
V	58.9 ± 5.1
VI	69.7 ± 5.5

ANOVA p-value < 0.001
Higher MED values were observed in darker skin phototypes, indicating increased resistance to UV-induced erythema.

Table 4. Correlation Between Melanin Index and MED

Variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Melanin Index vs MED	0.82	<0.001

A strong positive correlation was found between melanin content and UV resistance, suggesting that increased melanin provides enhanced photoprotection.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the relationship between melanin synthesis and physiological photoprotection. Results demonstrated a significant increase in melanin index across Fitzpatrick skin phototypes, confirming that skin pigmentation is primarily determined by melanin content rather than melanocyte number. These findings are consistent with previous reports indicating that darker skin contains larger and more heavily melanized melanosomes (8).

Melanogenesis is a tightly regulated biological process involving tyrosinase and associated melanogenic enzymes. Increased activity of these enzymes results in enhanced eumelanin production, which contributes to the darker pigmentation observed in higher phototypes (2,3). The observed increase in melanin index among darker skin types supports the central role of melanogenesis in determining pigmentation patterns.

A major finding of the study was the progressive increase in MED values with increasing melanin content. Individuals with higher melanin indices exhibited significantly greater resistance to UV-induced erythema. Similar observations have been reported by Brenner and Hearing, who demonstrated that melanin effectively absorbs ultraviolet radiation and reduces DNA damage within epidermal cells (6).

The strong positive correlation between melanin index and MED (r = 0.82) suggests that melanin is a major determinant of natural photoprotection. Eumelanin possesses broad-spectrum UV absorption properties and functions as a potent antioxidant capable of scavenging reactive oxygen species generated during UV exposure (9). These mechanisms collectively minimize oxidative stress, inflammation, and mutagenesis.

Melanin also contributes to photoprotection through formation of supranuclear caps in keratinocytes. These structures position melanin granules directly above cellular nuclei, reducing UV penetration and protecting genomic DNA from photochemical injury (10). This protective arrangement may explain the reduced prevalence of photoaging and skin cancer among individuals with darker skin pigmentation.

The findings of this study support previous evidence indicating that pigmentation serves as an adaptive evolutionary mechanism against environmental ultraviolet radiation (7). Populations residing in regions with high UV exposure typically exhibit increased eumelanin production, enhancing survival through improved photoprotection.

Limitations include the cross-sectional design and single-center recruitment. Future studies should investigate molecular biomarkers of melanogenesis and evaluate long-term photoprotective outcomes in diverse populations.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrated a significant association between melanin content and physiological photoprotection. Higher melanin levels were associated with increased minimal erythema dose and enhanced resistance to ultraviolet radiation. Melanin functions as a critical endogenous defense mechanism through UV absorption, antioxidant activity, and DNA protection. Understanding melanogenesis and photoprotection physiology may aid in the development of preventive and therapeutic approaches for UV-induced skin disorders.

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