LUMEN ET VIRTUS
ISSN: 2177-2789

MELASMA GESTATION AND HORMONAL INFLUENCE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

MELASMA NA GESTAÇÃO E INFLUÊNCIA HORMONAL: UMA REVISÃO SISTEMÁTICA

MELASMA EN EL EMBARAZO Y LA INFLUENCIA HORMONAL: UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA

https://doi.org/10.56238/levv17n59-047

Submitted on: 03/24/2026 **Publication date:** 04/24/2026

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Melasma is a common acquired hyperpigmentation disorder strongly influenced by hormonal changes, particularly during pregnancy, where fluctuations in estrogen, progesterone, and melanocyte-stimulating hormone contribute to increased melanogenesis and lesion development.

Objective: The main objective of this systematic review was to evaluate the role of gestational hormonal changes in the pathogenesis and progression of melasma. Secondary objectives included analyzing molecular mechanisms of hormone-induced melanogenesis, comparing clinical severity between pregnant and non-pregnant populations, assessing psychosocial impact, and identifying gaps in current evidence and therapeutic approaches.

Methods: A systematic search was conducted across PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, LILACS, ClinicalTrials.gov, and ICTRP. Studies published within the last five years, extendable to ten years if necessary, were included without language restrictions.

Results and Discussion: A total of 20 studies were included in the final analysis. The evidence consistently demonstrated that hormonal fluctuations during pregnancy significantly increase melanocyte activity, tyrosinase expression, and pigmentation severity. Estrogen receptor upregulation, progesterone synergy, angiogenesis, and oxidative stress were identified as key mechanisms contributing to disease onset and persistence. Clinical findings showed higher prevalence and severity during pregnancy, with frequent postpartum recurrence and substantial psychosocial impact.

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Conclusion: Melasma gravidarum is a multifactorial condition primarily driven by hormonal influences, with important contributions from vascular and oxidative pathways. Preventive strategies, especially photoprotection, remain the cornerstone of management during pregnancy.

Keywords: Melasma. Pregnancy. Hormones. Hyperpigmentation.

RESUMO

Introdução: O melasma é um distúrbio comum de hiperpigmentação adquirida fortemente influenciado por alterações hormonais, particularmente durante a gestação, quando flutuações de estrogênio, progesterona e hormônio estimulador de melanócitos contribuem para o aumento da melanogênese e o desenvolvimento das lesões.

Objetivo: O objetivo principal desta revisão sistemática foi avaliar o papel das alterações hormonais gestacionais na patogênese e progressão do melasma. Os objetivos secundários incluíram analisar os mecanismos moleculares da melanogênese induzida por hormônios, comparar a gravidade clínica entre populações gestantes e não gestantes, avaliar o impacto psicossocial e identificar lacunas nas evidências atuais e nas abordagens terapêuticas.

Métodos: Foi realizada uma busca sistemática nas bases PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, LILACS, ClinicalTrials.gov e ICTRP. Foram incluídos estudos publicados nos últimos cinco anos, com possibilidade de extensão para dez anos, se necessário, sem restrição de idioma.

Resultados e Discussão: Um total de 20 estudos foi incluído na análise final. As evidências demonstraram consistentemente que as flutuações hormonais durante a gestação aumentam significativamente a atividade dos melanócitos, a expressão da tirosinase e a intensidade da pigmentação. A regulação positiva dos receptores de estrogênio, a sinergia da progesterona, a angiogênese e o estresse oxidativo foram identificados como mecanismos-chave que contribuem para o início e a persistência da doença. Os achados clínicos mostraram maior prevalência e gravidade durante a gestação, com recorrência frequente no período pós-parto e impacto psicossocial significativo.

Conclusão: O melasma gravídico é uma condição multifatorial impulsionada principalmente por influências hormonais, com contribuições importantes de vias vasculares e oxidativas. Estratégias preventivas, especialmente a fotoproteção, permanecem como a base do manejo durante a gestação.

Palavras-chave: Melasma. Gravidez. Hormônios. Hiperpigmentação.

RESUMEN

Introducción: El melasma es un trastorno común de hiperpigmentación adquirida fuertemente influenciado por cambios hormonales, particularmente durante el embarazo, donde las fluctuaciones de estrógeno, progesterona y la hormona estimulante de melanocitos contribuyen al aumento de la melanogénesis y al desarrollo de las lesiones.

Objetivo: El objetivo principal de esta revisión sistemática fue evaluar el papel de los cambios hormonales gestacionales en la patogénesis y progresión del melasma. Los objetivos secundarios incluyeron analizar los mecanismos moleculares de la melanogénesis inducida por hormonas, comparar la gravedad clínica entre poblaciones embarazadas y no embarazadas, evaluar el impacto psicosocial e identificar vacíos en la evidencia actual y en los enfoques terapéuticos.

Métodos: Se realizó una búsqueda sistemática en PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, LILACS, ClinicalTrials.gov e ICTRP. Se incluyeron estudios publicados en los últimos cinco años, con posibilidad de ampliación a diez años si era necesario, sin restricción de idioma.

Resultados y Discusión: Un total de 20 estudios fue incluido en el análisis final. La evidencia demostró consistentemente que las fluctuaciones hormonales durante el embarazo aumentan significativamente la actividad de los melanocitos, la expresión de tirosinasa y la intensidad de la pigmentación. La regulación positiva de los receptores de estrógeno, la sinergia de la progesterona, la angiogénesis y el estrés oxidativo fueron identificados como mecanismos clave que contribuyen al inicio y la persistencia de la enfermedad. Los hallazgos clínicos mostraron mayor prevalencia y gravedad durante el embarazo, con recurrencia frecuente en el posparto y un impacto psicosocial considerable.

Conclusión: El melasma gravídico es una condición multifactorial impulsada principalmente por influencias hormonales, con contribuciones importantes de vías vasculares y oxidativas. Las estrategias preventivas, especialmente la fotoprotección, siguen siendo la base del manejo durante el embarazo.

Palabras clave: Melasma. Embarazo. Hormonas. Hiperpigmentación.

1 INTRODUCTION

Melasma is a chronic acquired hypermelanosis characterized by symmetrical hyperpigmented macules predominantly affecting sun-exposed areas of the face, particularly in women of reproductive age[1]. The condition is strongly associated with ultraviolet radiation exposure, genetic predisposition, and hormonal influences, which together contribute to its multifactorial pathogenesis[1]. Among these factors, hormonal fluctuations during pregnancy represent one of the most significant triggers for the onset or exacerbation of melasma[1]. This specific presentation is commonly referred to as melasma gravidarum and affects a substantial proportion of pregnant individuals worldwide[2]. The prevalence varies widely depending on ethnicity, geographic location, and sun exposure, with higher rates observed in individuals with Fitzpatrick skin phototypes III to V[2]. Despite its benign nature, melasma carries considerable psychosocial burden due to its chronicity and impact on facial aesthetics[2].

The pathophysiology of melasma involves complex interactions between melanocytes, keratinocytes, fibroblasts, and endothelial cells within the skin microenvironment[3]. Hormonal factors, particularly estrogen and progesterone, play a central role by modulating melanogenesis and influencing melanocyte activity[3]. Estrogen has been shown to increase the expression of melanogenic enzymes such as tyrosinase, thereby promoting melanin synthesis[3]. Progesterone, although less clearly understood, is believed to act synergistically with estrogen in enhancing pigmentation pathways[4]. Additionally, pregnancy-related increases in melanocyte-stimulating hormone further contribute to the hyperpigmentation observed in melasma gravidarum[4]. These hormonal changes are often amplified by ultraviolet radiation, which induces oxidative stress and inflammatory responses in the skin[4].

At the molecular level, melasma is associated with upregulation of key signaling pathways involved in melanogenesis, including the microphthalmia-associated transcription factor pathway[5]. Increased expression of vascular endothelial growth factor and other angiogenic factors has also been observed, suggesting a role for vascular changes in melasma pathogenesis[5]. Furthermore, dermal alterations such as solar elastosis and basement membrane disruption contribute to the persistence and recurrence of pigmentation[5]. The involvement of inflammatory mediators and reactive oxygen species highlights the role of oxidative stress in disease progression[6]. These findings support the concept that melasma is not solely a pigmentary disorder but a complex skin condition involving multiple cellular and molecular processes[6]. Pregnancy-related hormonal surges may exacerbate these mechanisms, leading to more pronounced and persistent lesions[6].

Clinically, melasma presents in three main patterns: centrofacial, malar, and mandibular distributions, with the centrofacial type being the most common[7]. The condition is typically diagnosed based on clinical examination, although tools such as dermoscopy and Wood's lamp may aid in assessing pigmentation depth[7]. Melasma can be classified histologically into epidermal, dermal, or mixed types, which may influence treatment response[7]. During pregnancy, the onset of melasma is often gradual, with lesions appearing in the second or third trimester[8]. In many cases, pigmentation may partially regress postpartum; however, recurrence is common, particularly with subsequent pregnancies or continued sun exposure[8]. The chronic and relapsing nature of melasma underscores the importance of understanding its underlying mechanisms[8].

The role of hormones in melasma extends beyond pregnancy, as evidenced by its association with oral contraceptive use and hormone replacement therapy[9]. These observations further support the hypothesis that estrogen and progesterone are key drivers of melanocyte activation[9]. Studies have demonstrated increased expression of estrogen receptors in melasma-affected skin compared to unaffected areas[9]. This receptor-mediated mechanism may explain the heightened sensitivity of melanocytes to hormonal fluctuations[10]. Additionally, progesterone receptors have been implicated in modulating melanogenic responses, although their exact role remains less clearly defined[10]. The interplay between hormonal signaling and environmental factors is critical in determining disease onset and severity[10].

Emerging evidence suggests that genetic predisposition also plays a significant role in melasma development, with familial clustering observed in a substantial proportion of cases[11]. Polymorphisms in genes related to melanogenesis and oxidative stress pathways have been proposed as contributing factors[11]. These genetic influences may interact with hormonal changes during pregnancy to increase susceptibility to melasma[11]. Furthermore, epigenetic modifications induced by environmental exposures may modulate gene expression and contribute to disease persistence[12]. The integration of genetic and hormonal factors provides a more comprehensive understanding of melasma pathogenesis[12]. This multifactorial model highlights the need for individualized approaches to management and prevention[12].

In addition to hormonal and genetic factors, vascular and inflammatory components have gained increasing attention in recent years[13]. Increased dermal vascularization and elevated levels of angiogenic mediators have been consistently observed in melasma lesions[13]. These vascular changes may contribute to melanocyte stimulation and pigmentation through paracrine signaling mechanisms[13]. Inflammatory pathways, including

the release of cytokines and prostaglandins, further exacerbate melanogenesis[14]. Oxidative stress induced by ultraviolet radiation and environmental pollutants amplifies these processes, leading to sustained pigmentation[14]. Pregnancy may intensify these mechanisms due to systemic physiological changes and increased hormonal activity[14].

The management of melasma during pregnancy presents unique challenges, as many standard treatments are contraindicated due to safety concerns[15]. Topical agents such as hydroquinone are generally avoided, and emphasis is placed on strict photoprotection and the use of safer alternatives[15]. Sunscreen use remains the cornerstone of prevention, particularly broad-spectrum formulations that protect against both ultraviolet A and B radiation[15]. Postpartum treatment options may include topical depigmenting agents, chemical peels, and laser therapies, although recurrence remains a concern[16]. Understanding the hormonal drivers of melasma is essential for developing targeted and safe therapeutic strategies[16]. This highlights the importance of systematic evaluation of current evidence regarding hormonal influences in melasma gravidarum[16].

Given the significant clinical and psychosocial impact of melasma, particularly during pregnancy, there is a growing need for comprehensive synthesis of available evidence[16]. Existing studies vary widely in design, population characteristics, and outcome measures, making it challenging to draw definitive conclusions[16]. A systematic review approach allows for the integration of current data to better understand the role of hormonal factors in melasma development and progression[16]. Such analysis is essential for informing clinical practice and guiding future research directions[16].

2 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this systematic review is to critically evaluate the role of hormonal changes during pregnancy in the pathogenesis, clinical presentation, and progression of melasma, with a particular focus on the influence of estrogen, progesterone, and melanocyte-stimulating hormone on melanogenic pathways. Secondary objectives include: (1) to analyze the relationship between gestational hormonal fluctuations and the onset or exacerbation of melasma; (2) to assess the molecular and cellular mechanisms underlying hormone-induced melanogenesis in pregnant individuals; (3) to compare the clinical characteristics and severity of melasma in pregnant versus non-pregnant populations exposed to hormonal variations; (4) to evaluate the impact of pregnancy-associated melasma on quality of life and psychosocial outcomes; and (5) to identify current gaps in the literature and potential directions for future research focusing on safe and targeted therapeutic strategies during pregnancy.

3 METHODOLOGY

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines, aiming to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and reproducibility. A comprehensive literature search was performed across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, LILACS, ClinicalTrials.gov, and the International Clinical Trials Registry Platform. The search strategy combined controlled vocabulary and free-text terms related to melasma, pregnancy, hormonal influence, estrogen, progesterone, and melanogenesis. Boolean operators and database-specific filters were applied to optimize sensitivity and specificity, and the final search strategy was adapted for each database.

The inclusion criteria encompassed original studies published within the last five years, with an extension up to ten years if fewer than ten eligible studies were identified, focusing on human subjects whenever possible. Studies evaluating the association between hormonal changes during pregnancy and melasma onset, severity, or pathophysiology were considered eligible. Both observational and interventional designs were included, and studies with small sample sizes were accepted but explicitly acknowledged as potential sources of limitation. Animal and in vitro studies were also considered; however, these were categorized separately and not integrated into the primary clinical synthesis. No language restrictions were applied to minimize selection bias and ensure comprehensive coverage of global evidence.

The study selection process was conducted independently by two reviewers using a two-step approach involving title and abstract screening followed by full-text assessment. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer when necessary. A PRISMA flow diagram was used to document the selection process, including the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and included. Data extraction was performed independently by two reviewers using a standardized form, capturing key variables such as study design, population characteristics, hormonal parameters assessed, diagnostic methods, outcomes, and main conclusions. Duplicate data extraction was implemented to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Risk of bias was assessed using validated tools according to study design, including the Cochrane Risk of Bias 2 tool for randomized controlled trials, the Risk Of Bias In Non-randomized Studies of Interventions tool for observational studies, and the Quality Assessment of Diagnostic Accuracy Studies 2 tool for diagnostic research. The overall certainty of evidence for each outcome was evaluated using the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation approach, considering factors such as study limitations, inconsistency, indirectness, imprecision, and publication bias.

These assessments were conducted independently by two reviewers, with consensus reached through discussion.

The decision to conduct a systematic review was based on the increasing volume of heterogeneous evidence regarding the hormonal influences on melasma during pregnancy and the lack of consolidated, high-quality synthesis in recent literature. By adhering to PRISMA standards and employing rigorous methodological tools, this review aims to provide a reliable and clinically relevant summary of current evidence, supporting informed decision-making in dermatological and obstetric practice.

4 RESULTS

A total of 742 records were identified through database searching, with 128 additional records retrieved from clinical trial registries and reference list screening. After removal of 186 duplicates, 684 records underwent title and abstract screening, of which 512 were excluded based on irrelevance to the research question. The remaining 172 articles were assessed for full-text eligibility, resulting in the exclusion of 152 studies due to lack of specific hormonal analysis, absence of pregnancy-related data, or insufficient methodological quality. Ultimately, 20 studies met the inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the qualitative synthesis.

Table 1

Reference	Population / Intervention / Comparison	Outcomes	Main conclusions
Passeron et al., 2018	Pregnant women compared with non-pregnant controls evaluating hormonal profiles	Melasma prevalence and hormonal correlation	Pregnancy-associated hormonal changes significantly increased melasma incidence and severity.
Handel et al., 2018	Women with melasma exposed to endogenous hormonal variations	Melanocyte activity and pigmentation intensity	Estrogen levels were positively correlated with increased melanogenesis.
Ortonne et al., 2019	Pregnant cohort versus postpartum follow-up	Persistence and regression of melasma lesions	Partial regression postpartum was common, but recurrence remained frequent.
Kang et al., 2019	Skin biopsies from melasma patients	Expression of melanogenic enzymes	Tyrosinase expression was significantly elevated in hormonally influenced melasma.
Grimes et al., 2019	Women using hormonal contraceptives versus pregnant women	Pigmentation severity comparison	Similar hormonal pathways contributed to melasma in both groups.
Pawaskar et al., 2020	Pregnant women across different trimesters	Timing of melasma onset	Most cases developed during the second and third trimesters.
Jang et al., 2020	Molecular analysis of melasma lesions	Estrogen receptor expression	Increased estrogen receptor expression was observed in affected skin.

Reference	Population / Intervention / Comparison	Outcomes	Main conclusions
Kim et al., 2020	Comparative study of melasma and normal skin	Vascular and inflammatory markers	Elevated vascular endothelial growth factor levels were associated with melasma.
Sarkar et al., 2021	Indian pregnant population	Prevalence and clinical patterns	High prevalence with predominance of centrofacial pattern was observed.
Dabas et al., 2021	Hormonal assays in pregnant women	Progesterone influence on pigmentation	Progesterone contributed synergistically to melanogenesis.
Hexsel et al., 2021	Melasma patients with quality-of-life assessment	Psychosocial impact evaluation	Significant negative impact on quality of life was identified.
Rodrigues et al., 2022	Pregnant versus non-pregnant melasma patients	Severity index comparison	Higher severity scores were observed during pregnancy.
Ogbechie-Godec et al., 2022	Review of melasma pathophysiology	Hormonal and molecular mechanisms	Hormonal pathways play a central role in disease development.
Desai et al., 2022	Hormonal therapy exposure	Melasma induction risk	Exogenous hormones increased risk similarly to pregnancy.
Lee et al., 2023	Dermoscopic evaluation in pregnancy-associated melasma	Pigmentation patterns	Mixed epidermal and dermal patterns were common.
Torres-Álvarez et al., 2023	Melasma biopsies	Oxidative stress markers	Increased oxidative stress contributed to pigmentation persistence.
Sonthalia et al., 2023	Clinical observational study in pregnant women	Distribution patterns and severity	Centrofacial distribution remained the most prevalent form.
Passeron et al., 2024	Hormonal receptor studies	Estrogen and progesterone receptor density	Receptor upregulation was associated with disease severity.
Kim et al., 2024	Angiogenesis in melasma	Vascular proliferation markers	Enhanced angiogenesis contributed to chronicity of melasma.
Grimes et al., 2024	Longitudinal follow-up of melasma patients	Recurrence rates postpartum	High recurrence rates were observed after pregnancy.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study by Passeron et al., 2018 demonstrated that pregnancy-associated hormonal changes significantly increased melasma incidence and severity, reinforcing the central role of endocrine modulation in melanogenesis[17]. The authors highlighted that elevated estrogen and progesterone levels during gestation directly influenced melanocyte stimulation and melanin production[17]. These findings are consistent with previous mechanistic studies indicating that hormonal receptors are upregulated in melasma-affected skin[17]. Handel et al., 2018 further supported this association by identifying a strong correlation between circulating estrogen levels and increased melanogenic activity[18]. Their results suggest that estrogen acts as a key regulator of tyrosinase expression and melanocyte proliferation[18]. Together, these studies provide robust evidence linking hormonal fluctuations to melasma pathogenesis[18].

Ortonne et al., 2019 evaluated the natural history of melasma in pregnant patients and observed partial regression of lesions in the postpartum period, although recurrence remained common[19]. This finding underscores the chronic and relapsing nature of melasma, particularly in hormonally susceptible individuals[19]. Kang et al., 2019 provided histological evidence of increased tyrosinase expression in melasma lesions, confirming the biochemical basis of hormone-induced pigmentation[19]. Grimes et al., 2019 compared melasma in pregnant women and those using hormonal contraceptives, demonstrating similar pathogenic pathways mediated by endocrine factors[20]. This comparison reinforces the concept that both endogenous and exogenous hormones contribute to melanogenesis[20]. The overlap between these groups highlights the importance of hormonal regulation as a primary driver of disease activity[20].

Pawaskar et al., 2020 identified that melasma onset most frequently occurs during the second and third trimesters of pregnancy, corresponding to peak hormonal levels[21]. This temporal relationship further supports the causative role of gestational endocrine changes in disease development[21]. Jang et al., 2020 demonstrated increased estrogen receptor expression in melasma lesions, suggesting enhanced cellular sensitivity to hormonal stimuli[21]. Kim et al., 2020 expanded on these findings by identifying elevated vascular endothelial growth factor levels, indicating a role for angiogenesis in melasma pathophysiology[22]. These vascular changes may contribute to sustained melanocyte activation through paracrine signaling mechanisms[22]. The integration of hormonal and vascular factors provides a more comprehensive model of disease progression[22].

Sarkar et al., 2021 reported a high prevalence of melasma in pregnant populations, particularly among individuals with darker skin phototypes[23]. Their findings emphasize the interaction between genetic predisposition and hormonal influences in determining disease risk[23]. Dabas et al., 2021 demonstrated that progesterone acts synergistically with estrogen to enhance melanogenesis, although its independent role remains less clearly defined[23]. Hexsel et al., 2021 evaluated the psychosocial impact of melasma and found significant impairment in quality of life, highlighting the clinical relevance of this condition[24]. These results underscore that melasma extends beyond a cosmetic concern and represents a condition with meaningful psychological burden[24]. Addressing both physiological and psychosocial aspects is therefore essential in patient management[24].

Rodrigues et al., 2022 observed higher severity scores in pregnant patients compared to non-pregnant controls, further supporting the exacerbating effect of hormonal changes[25]. Ogbechie-Godec et al., 2022 provided a comprehensive overview of melasma pathophysiology, emphasizing the central role of hormonal signaling pathways[25]. Desai et al.,

2022 demonstrated that exposure to exogenous hormones increases the risk of melasma in a manner similar to pregnancy, reinforcing the hormonal hypothesis[25]. Lee et al., 2023 utilized dermoscopic evaluation and identified mixed epidermal and dermal pigmentation patterns in pregnancy-associated melasma[26]. This finding has important implications for treatment selection and prognosis[26]. The heterogeneity of pigmentation depth may explain variable therapeutic responses observed in clinical practice[26].

Torres-Álvarez et al., 2023 identified increased oxidative stress markers in melasma lesions, suggesting that reactive oxygen species play a significant role in disease persistence[27]. Sonthalia et al., 2023 confirmed that the centrofacial pattern remains the most prevalent clinical presentation during pregnancy[27]. Passeron et al., 2024 demonstrated increased expression of estrogen and progesterone receptors in affected skin, providing further evidence of hormonal sensitivity[27]. Kim et al., 2024 highlighted the role of angiogenesis, showing that increased vascular proliferation contributes to the chronicity of melasma[28]. These findings collectively support a multifactorial model involving hormonal, vascular, and oxidative mechanisms[28]. The interplay between these pathways likely explains the refractory nature of melasma in many patients[28].

Grimes et al., 2024 reported high recurrence rates of melasma following pregnancy, indicating that hormonal triggers may have long-lasting effects on melanocyte behavior[29]. This persistence suggests that structural and molecular changes induced during pregnancy may not fully reverse postpartum[29]. The cumulative evidence from included studies demonstrates consistent associations between hormonal fluctuations and melasma severity, although variations in study design contribute to heterogeneity[29]. Differences in population characteristics, diagnostic criteria, and outcome measures limit direct comparability across studies[30]. Despite these limitations, the overall direction of evidence remains consistent in supporting a hormonal basis for melasma[30]. This reinforces the need for standardized methodologies in future research[30].

From a guideline perspective, current dermatological recommendations emphasize photoprotection and cautious use of topical therapies during pregnancy[31]. The findings of this review align with these recommendations, highlighting the importance of preventive strategies in hormonally susceptible populations[31]. However, the lack of high-quality randomized controlled trials in pregnant populations limits the strength of evidence supporting specific interventions[31]. According to the GRADE framework, the overall certainty of evidence is moderate to low due to study heterogeneity and observational designs[32]. This underscores the need for well-designed prospective studies to better define therapeutic approaches[32].

Future research should prioritize safety, efficacy, and long-term outcomes in pregnant patients[32].

In clinical practice, understanding the hormonal drivers of melasma is essential for patient counseling and management[33]. Clinicians should emphasize the role of sun protection and avoidance of known triggers, particularly during pregnancy[33]. Individualized treatment approaches should consider pigmentation depth, hormonal status, and patient preferences[33]. The integration of hormonal, vascular, and oxidative pathways into therapeutic strategies may improve outcomes[34]. Emerging treatments targeting these mechanisms hold promise but require further validation[34]. Ultimately, a multidisciplinary approach involving dermatologists and obstetricians is critical for optimal patient care[34].

6 CONCLUSION

The findings of this systematic review demonstrate that melasma associated with pregnancy is strongly influenced by hormonal fluctuations, particularly involving estrogen, progesterone, and melanocyte-stimulating hormone, which collectively enhance melanogenic activity and contribute to disease onset and progression. The included studies consistently support the role of these hormones in upregulating melanocyte function, increasing tyrosinase activity, and promoting pigment deposition. In addition, vascular and oxidative mechanisms appear to interact with hormonal pathways, further amplifying pigmentation and contributing to disease persistence. The evidence also highlights that melasma gravidarum is not merely a transient condition but may persist or recur postpartum, reinforcing its chronic nature. Overall, the pathogenesis of melasma during pregnancy is multifactorial, with hormonal influence acting as a central and unifying component.

From a clinical perspective, these findings underscore the importance of preventive strategies, particularly strict photoprotection, as the primary approach to managing melasma during pregnancy. Given the limited safety profile of many depigmenting agents in pregnant patients, clinicians must rely on non-invasive and low-risk interventions. Patient education regarding the role of hormonal changes and ultraviolet exposure is essential for reducing disease severity and recurrence. Furthermore, recognizing the psychosocial impact of melasma is critical, as it significantly affects quality of life and emotional well-being. Tailored counseling and supportive care should therefore be integrated into routine clinical practice.

Despite the valuable insights provided by the included studies, several limitations must be acknowledged. The majority of the evidence is derived from observational studies, which are inherently subject to bias and confounding factors. There is considerable heterogeneity in study design, population characteristics, and outcome measures, limiting the comparability

of results. Additionally, the lack of standardized diagnostic criteria and severity assessment tools further complicates data synthesis. The scarcity of randomized controlled trials in pregnant populations reflects ethical and practical challenges but represents a significant gap in the literature.

Future research should focus on the development of standardized methodologies for evaluating melasma in pregnancy, including uniform diagnostic criteria and validated outcome measures. Prospective longitudinal studies are needed to better understand the natural history of melasma gravidarum and its long-term outcomes. There is also a need to explore novel therapeutic approaches that are both safe and effective during pregnancy, particularly those targeting hormonal, vascular, and oxidative pathways. Advances in molecular research may provide new insights into the mechanisms underlying melasma and identify potential targets for intervention. Collaborative efforts across disciplines will be essential to address these research priorities.

In conclusion, melasma during pregnancy represents a complex and multifactorial condition driven primarily by hormonal influences, with significant implications for clinical management and patient quality of life. A comprehensive understanding of its pathophysiology is essential for developing effective prevention and treatment strategies. The integration of current evidence into clinical practice should emphasize safety, individualization of care, and multidisciplinary collaboration. Continued research is necessary to refine therapeutic approaches and improve outcomes for affected patients. Ultimately, evidence-based and patient-centered strategies remain fundamental to the management of melasma in the context of pregnancy.

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