

Stretch Marks – A Pregnancy Problem

Around 90% of pregnant women develop stretch marks through the course of their pregnancies, so it's more likely that you'll have them than not. They occur as reddish streaks around the abdomen and breasts, and sometimes on the thighs, hips and upper arms. Wherever there is weight gain on your body, there is a likelihood of stretch marks. Over time they'll fade, but unfortunately, stretch marks are permanent, and will leave a faint and silvery mark on the skin long after birth. The skin however, is a dynamic, living breathing organ that when supported and nourished, is capable of healing quickly from the strains of pregnancy. The best approach is a preventive one, however if you are already experiencing stretch marks, there's still plenty you can do to improve your skin-healing.

The causes of stretch marks

Stretch marks occur because the rapid weight gain of pregnancy increases the stress on the middle layer of the skin (the dermis), causing it to tear. Another cause of stretch marks is the hormonal changes of pregnancy that stimulate the breakdown of proteins in the skin, thus reducing skin elasticity. Some women may experience drier skin during pregnancy, and this further reduces skin elasticity and makes it more prone to tearing. It's also thought that younger skin, being tauter, is more likely to tear than older weaker skin, and women under 30 years of age are most at risk of developing stretch marks.

The risk factors

These are some of the factors that are thought to increase the risk of developing stretch marks:

- Being under 30 years of age
- Higher weight gain during pregnancy (roughly above 17kg)
- Family history/heredity
- Obesity
- Nutritional deficiencies in zinc, B5, silica, vitamins C and E
- Alcohol consumption has been linked to a higher risk of stretch marks
- Baby factors: significantly higher birth weight or gestational age.

Natural prevention and treatment of stretch marks

So what can be done to minimize stretch marks? Plenty! Using diet, light massage and natural topical applications, you can improve skin elasticity, reduce the risk of skin tearing and reduce the appearance of stretch marks. Sounds good!

What to put on your skin

Topical applications will come in handy to strengthen skin integrity; however you will need to use something that penetrates beyond the superficial layers of the skin for deeper effects. Consider the herb Arnica, which has a long established reputation throughout Europe as a safe and natural medicine that can speed up tissue healing and recovery. This herb can be helpful in healing skin tissues damaged by pregnancy. It is also useful to soothe aching muscles and pain. Apply arnica oil diluted in an oil base, with light, repetitive circular strokes. Ensure any product you use is suitable for use in pregnancy and does not contain parabens, synthetic fragrances or preservatives or any other potentially harmful chemicals. Natural and biodynamic products are best, and these will contain certification labels such as NaTrue and BDIH.



Other topical oils that help to nourish and soften the skin include Sweet Almond oil, Jojoba oil, Wheatgerm oil, and Carrot oil. These oils are rich in Essential Fatty Acids and the vitamins A, C, E, B, and are able to hydrate and strengthen skin cell membranes. This makes the cells less prone to damage and improves skin elasticity. Sweet Almond oil is especially useful for pregnancy as it does not have a distinct scent. Like the redness-reducing Jojoba oil, it is very useful in topical applications for mothers-to-be. Wheatgerm oil is recognizable by its bright yellow-orange colour and is so healing to the skin it's known as the 'scar healing oil', and is recommended by aromatherapists around the world. It is especially suited to skin that is recovering from rapid stretching, such as skin during pregnancy and after birth. A dedicated Pregnancy Body Oil containing all of these oils can be safely applied weeks before and all the way throughout your pregnancy. It is generally recommended to continue applying such oils for up to 3 months after birth to optimise the effects.

What to put in your body

To improve your skin health in general, eat lots of carrot, pumpkin, raw nuts and seeds, olive oil, eggs, meat and sardines. These are high in the fat-soluble vitamins A and E, essential for maintaining skin elasticity. To strengthen skin collagen, eat citrus fruits, blackcurrants, bananas, strawberries, blueberries, watercress, papaya, broccoli, snow peas and a little dark chocolate on the side! These are all high in vitamin C and bioflavonoids and also have an anti-aging effect on the skin. The deeply nutritious Blackthorn plant has a reputation for maintaining a strong vital force throughout rapid growth spurts and makes an excellent strengthening tonic for women during pregnancy.

Massage for stretch marks

Daily massage is a wonderful way to reduce the risk or intensity of stretch marks during pregnancy, and is recommended by Valerie Ann Worwood, author of *The Fragrant Pharmacy* and an international authority on the use of oils and aroma in healing. Massage provides stimulation of the tissues underlying the superficial layers of the skin, even when applied in light strokes, which means it is both effective and safe in pregnancy. To prevent or treat stretch marks, softly draw small repetitive circles over the skin using a dedicated pregnancy body oil regularly, concentrating on any areas of your body where there has been or may be weight gain.

Look out for the nutrients and oils listed above in any natural skincare product that you purchase, and stroke away to your hearts content. Nourish your body with healthy food and fortify your skin with regular daily massage. It's that easy! When things seem a little harder, just remember, stretch marks are a proud symbol of the journey of pregnancy, and the challenges that come with this experience!

Su-lin Sze is a naturopath, and has contributed this article to us on behalf of Weleda Australia. For more information about Weleda natural and biodynamic products for mother and baby see www.weleda.com.au

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