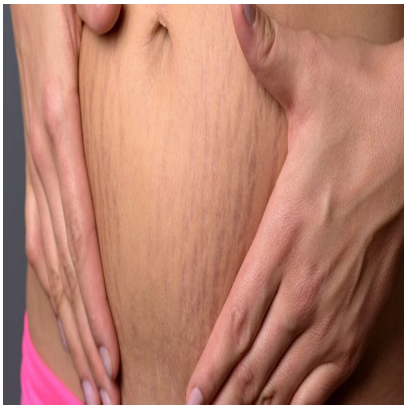

Description

Understanding stretch marks

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Published in The Practising Midwife Volume 23 Issue 6 June 2020
https://doi.org/10.55975/KWAX3623

Introduction

During pregnancy, a woman's body is working at full tilt. The baby bump rapidly grows rounder, and along with the physical changes the question of stretch marks (striae gravidarum) always comes up: What can be done to prevent them?

How do stretch marks develop?

The skin on the abdomen works hard to adapt during pregnancy in order to accommodate the growing fetus. Stretch marks usually first appear around the sixth and seventh month of pregnancy[1] but have been reported before 24 weeks' gestation.[2] Stretch marks affect 50% to 90% of women.[3] Though not a health issue they can affect women in different ways, for example, by causing stress or becoming an aesthetic or cosmetic concern.[4]

The epidermis of the skin grows along with the baby and the mother's fat deposits, which are gradually forming as well. Various hormones prepare the dermis – the layer of skin where the connective tissue is located – so that it can stretch more easily. When the dermis can no longer stretch any further, it tears as much as necessary to give the body enough space. During pregnancy, these tears are visible as red 'stripes'. After a few months, they grow paler and are visible as thin white stripes – scars under the skin.

Why women get stretch marks is not yet well understood, however, possibilities include mechanical stretching of the skin; hormonal changes in pregnancy; genetic predisposition; and family history of stretch marks.[5] Other factors may be at play too, but findings are inconsistent across research studies.

Solutions?

Topical treatments are popular, however, no one solution has been shown to work for everyone. Some women report success with regular use of creams or oils massaged into the skin – the stomach area, the breasts or the buttocks, which may help the skin to become more elastic.[6] It is beneficial to start this regime before stretch marks appearing.[7,8]

Other tips include using good sun protection – this does not prevent stretch marks but can improve the overall health of your skin. Sun exposure can break down the skin collagen fibres possibly contributing to your chance of getting stretch marks.[9]

Exercise improves circulation and prevents inflammation. Exercising regularly strengthens the connective tissue, which can help to prevent stretch marks but certainly won't make them go away.[10]

Like massages, contrasting showers of hot and cold water increase blood flow and improve circulation to the skin.

A healthy diet with plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables and liquids (water or juices diluted with water) will also ensure that the skin has an optimal supply of nutrients.

Medical products like Tretinoin, often called by its brand name Retin-A, can cause side effects, such as redness and peeling. Pregnant or breastfeeding women should not use this drug.[11] **TPM**

Summary

Whether pregnant or not, the majority of men and women will get stretch marks at some point in their life. While societal pressure may imbue negative feelings about our appearance, we advocate acceptance of your stripes and using a topical treatment for comfort is probably the most empowering method of dealing with them.

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Date Created
1st June 2020