

## Get the Pregnancy Glow

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How does pregnancy affect the skin? During pregnancy some women radiate the glow of pregnancy and their complexions even out. The reason for this is because of increased blood circulation and the existence of high levels of the pregnancy hormone oestrogen. A lucky few will continue to reap the benefits of improved skin even after the birth of their baby.

Other women aren't so lucky and the added hormones in their blood stream can cause a myriad of skin problems. The pregnancy hormones racing through your body inevitably affect your skin, for some women this can mean problems with their complexion such as acne and chloasma or underlying conditions such as eczema may be exacerbated. As your body begins to take on its new shape your skin is stretched and other parts are put under more pressure, problems such as stretchmarks, water retention, swelling, varicose veins, itchy skin and calf cramps may affect you. Pregnancy also makes its mark on your body with peculiar features such as the linea negra.

Suffering from skin problems can be stressful, and stress can make skin problems worse. You must keep in mind that these problems are pregnancy related only and will clear up as fast as they arrived once your pregnancy is over.

Always check the label of any product which you use on your skin during pregnancy, they should display a warning if they are not suitable for use during pregnancy. If you're unsure, check with your midwife, GP or pharmacist.

### Acne

Some women find that their pregnancy hormones relieve them of acne, for others their pregnancy results in overactive sebaceous glands. These produce sebum which becomes blocked in the pores and results in inflammation in the form of red pimples, common acne (acne vulgaris). Acne can affect the chest and back areas as well as the face.

During pregnancy avoid acne products containing benzoyl peroxide or salicylic acid which have been linked to some birth defects. Instead employ the tried and tested remedies of teenagers: drink plenty of water and keep your skin routine simple. There's no need to overcomplicate things and risk an adverse reaction to a new product whilst your skin is so sensitive. Stick to a regular routine of cleansing, toning and moisturising and use an exfoliator twice a week to slough away the dead skin cells and freshen your pores. Tea tree oil and lavender oil are great for healing and calming irritations, but use sparingly early on in pregnancy.

### Chloasma

The pregnancy hormones oestrogen and progesterone are thought to make the body secrete more melanin causing uneven skin pigmentation on the chin, cheeks, nose and forehead. This condition is chloasma, also referred to as the mask of pregnancy. The condition is not caused by sunlight, but sunlight does affect the condition and so daily use of a facial sunscreen (SPF25 or higher) is recommended. Simple make-up can disguise the condition.

Chloasma will fade in most women after pregnancy, but in some can continue after the birth. If it does and you are worried, seek the advice of your GP.

### Stretchmarks

Stretchmarks appear in up to 90% of all pregnant women. Some women are more susceptible to stretchmarks than others: for example if you have a genetic pre-disposition to them, have experienced rapid weight gain or loss or are fair skinned. Women who keep their skin hydrated and moisturised shorten their chances of suffering from them. Stretchmarks can appear on the stomach area, thighs, hips, buttocks, breasts and arms, in fact anywhere susceptible to stretching or growth in pregnancy. They appear as silvery, marble like lines of flesh caused by the

tearing of the dermis tissues. Stretchmarks are not painful but they can cause an itchy sensation if you do not regularly moisturise them during the period of stretching and growth.

Some women swear that moisturising regularly day and night during and after pregnancy will keep stretch marks at bay. It's certainly worthwhile taking the time to moisturise and massage your skin during pregnancy. Cocoa butter is a favourite of many mums-to-be.

Stretchmarks will fade in time but won't disappear completely, consider them a harmless reminder of your stretchier days.

#### Water retention

Your pregnant body will probably retain 30% more water in its bloodstream during pregnancy. The basic force of gravity can force this water to collect into the tissues of the legs and feet, where it causes swelling. Sometimes this can be painful. Water retention may not be apparent early on in pregnancy, and is more common in the final trimester. Standing on your feet all day also exacerbates the problem.

To avoid the problems of water retention, do put your feet up as often as you can on a regular basis throughout the course of the day. Massage also helps and is great for relaxing too.

Persistent or severe water retention may be an early sign of pre-eclampsia, seek the immediate advice of your GP or midwife if this happens.

#### Varicose veins

Oestrogen and progesterone are the culprits here again, affecting the walls of the veins making them more likely to swell and dilate. Varicose veins appear on the legs, mainly in the calf areas. They appear to be essentially exaggerated versions of normal veins: ranging from a small, spidery type appearance to raised, dark purple, thicker versions of your veins. They are usually painless but some women do suffer discomfort with them.

Prevention is better than cure and leg massage and elevation of the legs is again helpful here. It's important to keep the blood circulating well also and so regular exercise will help to ward off varicose veins. When massaging legs, do so lightly and be careful not to massage directly over the vein itself which may bring about or dislodge a clot.

There are many treatments on the market for varicose veins once they have formed. Your GP will be able to advise on the treatments available best suited to your circumstances, but these include laser treatment and surgical removal.

#### Itchy Skin

All that stretching of the skin will cause a dry itchy feeling. In its most basic form, itching is completely preventable with a good moisturising routine. We recommend using gentle products to cleanse your skin, a regular but gentle exfoliator, and daily moisturising.

But beware, cholestasis is a condition affecting the liver which causes an increase in bile salts in the skin. Severe itching, particularly on the palms of the hands can be an early warning sign of the condition, so check with your GP or midwife if you are worried.

Pregnancy will inevitably cause your skin to be more sensitive and you may find that conditions which you are predisposed to become more prominent in pregnancy, such as eczema, dermatitis and other common allergies. Always check with your GP, midwife or pharmacist before using products for these conditions when pregnant.

#### Calf cramps

The extra pressure which your body is put under during pregnancy can sometimes result in calf cramps during the second and third trimester. Light massage of the calf area will help to ease the condition as will gently rotating your foot in circles.

## Linea Nigra

This is a truly magical phenomenon of pregnancy. A dark line starting at the pubic bone grows up the fundus throughout your pregnancy reflecting the growth of your uterus. The linea nigra generally fades after pregnancy but can stay with women for many years after the birth of their child.

### **Short note about the author**

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