



# STRETCH MARKS

## WHAT WORKS

It is a universally held belief that motherhood changes you. From the first moment that you hold your bundle of joy in your arms, it is safe to say that he or she has you eternally wrapped around their little finger. The side effects of pregnancy, however, may not be quite as picturesque, often leaving your body with not-so-pretty reminders of the most beautiful moment in your life.

“Stretch marks, or striae distensae, are wrinkled, hypopigmented (less colour than the surrounding skin) and atrophic (thinned out scar-like) marks that can occur after pregnancy. They usually develop after the 24 week,” said Dr. Feng Chong, Chief of Plastic Surgery at the Alberta Surgical Centre and a plastic and cosmetic surgeon at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

“Many women complain about the esthetic concerns of these marks. They are unhappy with the appearance of the affected area. There is also a psychological impact – decreased confidence, emotional stress.”

Dr. Chong noted that there are three main theories as to why stretch marks occur, which include mechanical stretching of the skin, hormonal changes and structural disturbances in the skin. The most common areas to get stretch marks are the thighs, breasts and in particular, the abdomen. Even though stretch marks are very common in pregnant women, they aren't the only ones predisposed to them.

According to Dr. Chong, some risk factors for a predisposition to stretch marks include the following: a positive family history, maternal age (younger women more commonly develop stretch marks than older women, because as we age, our skin is more able to stretch), maternal body mass index (overweight women are more at risk, giving birth to a larger or heavier baby), gestational age (the time period between conception and birth), excess amniotic fluid during pregnancy, which causes extra stretching on the abdomen, weight gain and certain medical conditions, and medications, such as gland diseases and corticosteroid creams, and oral or systemic steroids. Stretch marks can also occur during puberty and as a result of weight training.

Although the market is filled with creams, peels, lasers, massage oils and herbal remedies that claim to both prevent and rid your skin of having stretch marks, Dr. Chong pointed out that there have been very few wellperformed scientific studies on these herapies.

“Ultimately, any therapeutic intervention must be viewed just as one would view medications. No one would ever take a medication that has not gone through numerous trials and studies,” emphasized Dr. Chong. “ No one would take a medication that has not been proven to make a significant difference or one that has not been proven to be better than other medications. The public should view any treatment modalities for stretch marks similarly. Because there are no definitive studies for treatments, such as lasers, creams, etc.”

Dr. Chong mentioned that there may be potential for treatments such as tretinoin cream, dermabrasion, chemical peels and lasers, but the results are unclear and there are possible side effects. According to the Mayo Clinic, side effects of dermabrasion, chemical peels and laser resurfacing can include swelling, redness and infection.

However, there are other options available. A tummy tuck or abdominoplasty, for instance, could potentially remove some of the stretch marks from the abdomen.

“In a tummy tuck, the excess skin from the abdomen is removed,” stated Dr. Chong, who performs this procedure a number of times a week. “It involves an incision in the groin to above the belly button. All the skin and fat between these two incisions are cut out. The rectus muscle (six-pack) is pulled together. We then pull the skin from above the belly button all the way down to the groin. In the end, there is a scar below the panty line and a faint one around the belly button.”

Dr. Chong stated that this procedure should remove all the stretch marks from the groin to just above the belly button. Patients that have stretch marks just above the belly

button usually report an improvement in the appearance of stretch marks, because they are pulled tight quite low into the groin. Since they are pulled tightly, they become fainter and less visible. The procedure helps tighten the six-pack muscles and provide a firmer, tighter and toned abdomen. After the operation, Dr. Chong recommends that patients take approximately two weeks off from work and refrain from exercise or heavy lifting for eight weeks.

Risks of the surgery include infection, bleeding, scarring, loss of sensation and a negative reaction to the general anesthetic. As with any surgery, there is a chance for deep vein thrombosis (DVTs), which are blood clots, predominantly in the veins of the legs.

In addition to a tummy tuck, there are procedures that can help improve stretch marks on other areas of the body, such as the thighs and breasts.

“A breast lift will remove extra loose skin from the breast. So if there happens to be stretch marks in the areas where we are cutting our extra skin, they will also be removed,” expanded Dr. Chong. “However, the main purpose of the breast lift is to improve the shape of the breast, not to remove stretch marks. Removal of the stretch marks is just a positive ‘side effect.’”

Thigh lift procedures similarly will remove extra loose skin, and if there are stretch marks present in the area where the extra skin is removed, these will also be removed, said Dr. Chong. According to The American Society For Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS), side effects of the breast lift and thigh lift procedures may include scarring, infection, bleeding and adverse reaction to anesthesia.

However, even though these procedures are helpful with minimizing stretch marks, they are not full or readymade solutions to the problem.

“Even with tummy tucks I advise patients that this procedure’s main goal is to remove excess skin from the abdomen and to tighten the abdominal muscles,” emphasized Dr. Chong. “The reduction of stretch marks just happens to be a positive side benefit.”