

Skin Deep

Stretch Marks, an Unblessed Event

By ABBY ELLIN

COME down with some kind of aesthetic malaise — a dark patch or a receding hairline — and invariably someone will profess to have the magic cure.

So it is with stretch marks, the road map of pregnancy, the telltale signs carved into about 90 percent of pregnant women's abdomens, derrières, breasts and thighs. Market research firms like the NPD Group, Information Resources and Mintel don't track the size of the skin-care market for pregnant women.

"It's hard to pin down, but there's definitely been a proliferation of premium maternity skin-care products, many of which are targeted as

Genetics and race
also apparently
play a role.

preventing stretch marks," said Virginia Lee, senior research analyst at Euromonitor International, a market research firm in Chicago. She attributes it, in part, to the publicity surrounding, say, Julia Roberts and Debra Messing, who looked so good during and after their pregnancy.

Various brands tout them: Mama Mio Tummy Rub Stretch Mark Oil, Mustela Stretch Marks Double Action cream, Bella B Tummy Honey (said to be the elixir of choice for yummy mummies like Angelina, Gwyneth and Melania).

But the most pressing question on most women's minds (and stomachs): Can stretch marks, or striae gravidarum, as they are known among the Ph.D. set, really be prevented? The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists says no.

"There's not much you can do about these other than monitor your weigh gain," said Dr. Laura Riley, a maternal fetal medicine specialist at Massachusetts General Hospital and author of "You and Your Baby" (2006). "Various creams and lotions are sold to prevent stretch marks from developing or getting worse, but the jury is out on whether they work."

But the American Pregnancy Association suggests that women can reduce the probability of stretch marks (the key word being "probability").

In a double-blind study published in the 1991 International Journal of Cosmetic Science, 34 percent of pregnant women who massaged a cream containing gotu kola extract (*Centella asiatica*), alpha tocopherol (a form of vitamin E) and collagen-elastic hydrolysates (enzymes) into their skin developed stretch marks, compared with 56 percent who used a placebo.

Stretch marks occur when skin loses its elasticity, usually from rapid weight gain — a common occurrence, alas, when one is with child. But research has also shown that genetics and race play a role in stretch marks.

A survey by the department of dermatology at Stanford University School of Medicine sampled 161 women who had given birth. It found that 48 percent of the women with stretch marks



ABOVE, GETTY IMAGES; BELOW, TONY CESCICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

said their mothers also had them.

Nearly 80 percent of the women of color (African-American, Hispanic, Southeast Asian, among others) said they had stretch marks, said Dr. Alexa B. Kimball, an associate professor of dermatology at Harvard Medical School, and an author on the study.

Diminishing stretch marks is a patient's best bet, said Dr. Amy Derick, a dermatologist in Barrington, Ill. "There's really not any data regarding creams," she said. "But you can do laser treatments or Retin-A after the fact, especially early on when the lines are red and purple." Studies have found that topical tretinoin can lighten stretch marks as well as reduce their size. And she is certainly not opposed to pregnant women massaging their bellies with moisturizing oils and creams. "It makes them feel like they're being pro-active, and if it feels good, why not?" she said. "It can't hurt."

Excuse Me,
But I Think
I'm Glowing

RASHES, pimples, dark spots, stretch marks, weight gain. Is there any good news, besides, of course, the baby?

Actually, there is, and Jessica Shevitz Rauch, 35, who is six months pregnant, could be the poster mom-to-be.

"I felt my hair the other day — it was like silk!" gushed Ms. Shevitz Rauch, who lives in Brooklyn. "I heard that when you get pregnant it gets thicker, because it doesn't fall out as much. My skin's looking pretty good, too. It feels really soft."

The luckiest among pregnant women boast of lustrous hair and dewy skin. The reason, doctors suspect, is hyperemia, increased blood flow that pregnant women get.

"There is definitely increased blood volume and swelling," said Dr. Jody A. Levine, a board-certified dermatologist in Manhattan. "Full faces often do appear to glow more, but I can't give you a scientific reason for it."

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WHAT WORKS? The jury remains out on whether the many creams and lotions on the market can get rid of, or at least lighten, stretch marks.

