

# Skin Changes During Pregnancy

## What types of skin changes happen during pregnancy?

Changes in the skin are common during pregnancy. Many of the changes are caused by the higher levels of hormones during pregnancy. For example:

- You may notice a darkening or redness of skin in some places, such as your face or abdomen.
- You may have stretch marks.
- Your skin may itch and become red.
- Small tags of skin may form.
- Hair may grow on your face or chest.
- Spider veins or varicose veins may develop.
- You may get new brown moles, or your moles get bigger.

Some normal changes in your skin and hair are described in more detail below. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider if you notice any unusual skin changes or have any questions about caring for your skin.

## Where does the skin get darker?

One of the changes you might notice early in your pregnancy is a darkening of the skin on or around your nipples. Later in your pregnancy, you may see a dark line on your skin that runs down your abdomen from your belly button to your pubic hairline. This line is called the linea nigra, or black line. You might also have blotchy brown spots on your forehead, nose, or cheeks. This is a skin change called melasma, chloasma, or the mask of pregnancy. Your inner thighs may become darker. Freckles, moles, and scars may also seem darker.

The darkening of the skin is caused by the increased amounts of hormones during pregnancy and an increase in the substance called melanin that is made by your body to give color to your hair, skin, and eyes. Skin darkening is more common in darker-skinned women. Most of these changes will fade or go away after delivery. The skin darkening is made worse by exposure to the sun. Using sunscreen when you are outdoors may help prevent it. Do NOT use skin-bleaching treatments when you are pregnant.

## What are stretch marks?

Stretch marks are pink or purple streaks in the skin, usually over the thighs, hips, belly, and breasts. They are caused by the stretching of the skin as you gain weight. They usually appear during the 6th and 7th months of pregnancy. More than half of all pregnant women develop stretch marks. They are much more likely to happen in women with light skin color. Creams and lotions can keep your skin well moisturized, but they do not keep you from getting stretch marks. Most stretch marks fade after delivery to very light-colored lines, but they often do not go away completely. When you are not pregnant, putting retinoid products, such

as tretinoin, on the stretch marks may help them fade. Do NOT use this medicine while you are pregnant.

### **What causes itching?**

The higher levels of hormones and stretching skin during pregnancy, especially over your belly, can cause itching. The best treatment is to use a moisturizer after bathing and several times throughout the day. Use only unscented, gentle soaps to wash your hands or clean your skin, and avoid hot showers or baths because they can dry your skin. The itching usually goes away after your baby is born. Try not to get too hot. Heat can make the itching worse.

Talk with your healthcare provider if:

- The itching is getting worse or keeps you awake.
- You have a rash.
- You have nausea, vomiting, and less appetite, and you are more tired than usual.

### **What are skin tags?**

Skin tags are tiny, floppy growths of skin that can occur anywhere but are usually in or near the armpits or breasts. They are harmless. They usually fall off without treatment. If they cause discomfort or do not go away after pregnancy, they can be removed easily by your healthcare provider. Let your healthcare provider know if you notice one that is growing very fast or is bleeding.

### **What changes are there in hair growth?**

You may find that hair is growing in places where only men normally grow hair, such as the face and chest. This growth of hair is caused by the changes in the levels of various hormones. It usually stops and most of it goes away within 6 months after delivery.

One to five months after your baby is born, you may lose more hair from your scalp than usual. This loss of hair happens because during pregnancy more hairs go into the resting phase that is part of the normal growth and loss cycle of scalp hair. Six to twelve months after delivery your hair will become thicker again. This condition does not cause permanent hair loss or obvious bald patches.

Sometimes low thyroid hormone during pregnancy may cause hair thinning or loss while you are pregnant and after the baby is born.

### **What are spider and varicose veins?**

Spider veins are common during pregnancy. They start out as small red veins that after a while might look like a roadmap of red, blue, and purple streaks. They usually occur on the legs during the second trimester but fade after delivery. If they don't go away, talk with your provider about treatment choices.

During pregnancy, pressure on the large veins behind the uterus causes the blood to return to the heart more slowly. This means there is more blood in the veins of

the legs than when you were not pregnant. This can lead to swollen veins, called varicose veins. They are usually raised above the surface of the skin. They can be twisted or bulging and are dark purple or blue. You can try to prevent varicose veins by:

- Wearing support hose designed for pregnant women.
- Not standing or sitting for long periods of time.
- Not wearing tight knee-high stockings or garters.
- Walking often to help increase circulation.
- Sitting with your legs and feet raised when possible. If you work at a desk, you can prop your feet up on a footstool, box, or several books. Or when relaxing at home, keep your feet up on a footstool, some pillows on the couch, or another chair.

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