

10 Ways Pregnancy Changes Your Skin

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Published August 31, 2010

Your belly's not the only body part growing and changing during pregnancy. Here's what will happen to your skin in the next nine months...

Pregnancy brings more than an expanding waistline, strange cravings and a ride on an emotional roller coaster. You might also get thick gorgeous hair and rosy cheeks.

Or not. For some women, pregnancy delivers breakouts, discoloration, skin tags and varicose veins. It also may cause hypersensitivity, so you can't use your favorite jewelry or beauty products.

The reason is hormonal fluctuations.

"Changes in estrogen and progesterone levels influence skin in all pregnant women," says Judith Hellman, M.D., associate clinical professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York.

What else is waiting for you? Read on to find out.

1. What to expect: That pregnancy glow and clear complexion.

Experts believe a combination of hormones, oil and a 40% increase in blood volume makes a pregnant woman's skin seem luminous during pregnancy.

"Pregnancy's hormonal changes deliver more oxygen and nutrients to all organs, including the skin," says Hellman.

Another reason for that radiance: Weight gain, which "fills out the skin and 'tightens' it, making it appear smooth," she says.

2. What to expect: Breakouts

The increase in progesterone levels also triggers more "sebum (oil) production, causing breakouts," explains Boston-based dermatologist Ranella Hirsch, M.D. But choose acne products with care. Avoid products with retinol, retinoids and salicylic acid, because of possible birth defects.

"Retinols and retinoids are vitamin A derivatives, and oral vitamin A in high doses can cause serious birth defects," says Matthew Schulman, M.D., assistant professor of plastic surgery at Mount Sinai Medical Center. "It's not likely that a topical retinol or retinoid will harm a developing baby, but there's no data regarding the use of these ingredients during pregnancy."

Use benzoyl peroxide instead, Schulman advises. The acne-fighter has been tested and found to be safe during pregnancy. Or try natural topical remedies such as tea tree oil and lavender.

Other dermatologist-administered acne treatments, such as intense pulsed light (IPL) treatments and micro-dermabrasion, are also safe, Schulman says.

"Just make sure it's a crystal-free micro-dermabrasion system, because the commonly used aluminum crystals haven't been studied during pregnancy."

3. What to expect: Dark skin patches

About half of pregnant women develop melasma, which appears as large, dark patches on their face. Sometimes called the "mask of pregnancy," this hyper-pigmentation is commonly found symmetrically on the cheeks, nose and forehead.

Increased hormones levels are one factor.

"Estrogen, progesterone and melanocyte-stimulating hormone" – which regulates skin color – "are highest during the third trimester," Schulman says. Unfortunately, pregnant women have few options to prevent melasma. Avoid the sun to prevent it from worsening and use a broad-spectrum sunscreen (which blocks ultraviolet A and B rays).

After delivery and you're done with breast feeding, you can use lightening products with licorice, vitamin C, kojic acid, soy or retinol.

4. What to expect: Good thick hair days

Normally, each hair grows for 2-6 years, then rests for a few months before falling out. But a pregnant woman's hair rests longer before falling out, creating a thicker mane. Nails also grow longer and stronger.

"Pregnancy boosts your body's hormones, blood volume and water, providing more oxygen and nutrients for your hair," says Hirsch.

Enjoy it while it lasts; the effect disappears after pregnancy.

5. What to expect: Hair everywhere

The downside of lush, fast-growing hair? It's not all on your head, but also on your face, bikini line, underarms or legs.

Depilatories/bleach creams are fine for small areas like the lip, but skip large spots like the bikini line. Such products have active ingredients, such as barium sulfide powder and calcium thioglycolate, which could be absorbed into your bloodstream and affect your developing baby. They haven't been tested and proven safe to use during pregnancy.

Even procedures such as waxing or depilatories may feel extra painful and cause breakouts or rashes. If so, try shaving, which may be less irritating. Besides, the effect is temporary: Hair – even on your head – "will start to fall out about 3-6 months post-partum, a condition known as telogen effluvium," says Elizabeth Hale, M.D., clinical associate professor of dermatology at NYU Medical Center. "So let things normalize before booking laser hair removal."

6. What to expect: Sensitive skin

Your emotions aren't the only touchy thing during these nine months.

"Pregnancy can make skin more sensitive – even to products or materials" that never bothered you before, says Hale. "A common problem is irritation from jewelry that you might have worn your whole life."

Use gentle, fragrance-free products and always test new skincare products on your wrist or behind your ear before using them.

7. What to expect: Moles

Moles may get bigger or new ones can crop up. Some women may even develop pyogenic granulomas, dark, oozing growths also called "pregnancy tumors," on hands or in the mouth.

Though most usually are harmless, see a dermatologist anytime you see a new or changing mole, spot or pigment patch.

"Skin cancers can pop up during pregnancy, so it's a good idea to have them examined," says Hellman. "It's not easy for the average person to know which are benign." If the moles are harmless, wait until after delivery to have them removed. But don't delay treatment if they're cancerous.

"They can be treated surgically, even during pregnancy," Hellman says.

8. What to expect: Skin tags

Skin tags – harmless, tiny growths attached to the body by a small, narrow base – are commonly found in high-friction spots like the underarms, groin area, under breasts or the base of the neck. They often appear in the second and third trimesters.

That's because "during pregnancy, elevated levels of estrogen and progesterone stimulate the growth of the skin's outer layers," says Schulman.

Although some shrink post-partum, most remain. A dermatologist can remove them.

9. What to expect: A dark stripe on your abdomen.

About three-fourths of pregnant women get a dark black, vertical line, called a linea nigra, heading from the belly button to pubic area.

"It results from increased melanin production in pregnancy," says Mona Gohara, M.D., a Connecticut-based dermatologist with Advanced DermCare.

"Higher levels of estrogen in the body ratchet up pigment-producing cells, making them go into melanin overdrive."

In fact, your nipples may darken too. Don't worry: Both fade after pregnancy.

Because UV rays can make the linea nigra darker, use sunscreen if you plan to expose your belly in a bikini.

10. What to expect: Varicose veins

There's a downside to the increased blood volume that brings a glow to your cheeks: It also puts pressure on leg veins, causing painful swelling.

"Varicose veins are abnormally stretched, swollen veins protruding from the skin," explains Luis Navarro, M.D., director

of the Vein Treatment Center in Manhattan. "They're often the result of faulty vein valves or weak walls."

The antidote is exercise, which boosts circulation and keeps blood from pooling. Compression hose are especially important if you're on your feet a lot.

If varicose veins don't vanish on their own, the most effective treatment is sclerotherapy post pregnancy or after you're done having kids, Navarro says. During this procedure, a vascular surgeon or dermatologist injects foam into the veins to close them up. A few sessions are needed, but legs often return to pre-pregnancy smoothness.

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