

Stretch marks are narrow, streak-like lines that can develop on the surface of the skin. They are also sometimes known as stria or striae.

Stretch marks are often red or purple at first, before gradually fading to a silvery-white colour. They are usually 1-10mm wide and are a few centimetres long.

The structure of the skin

The skin is made up of three main layers:

- The epidermis is the outer layer of skin. It forms a protective barrier for the inside of the body and is made up of layers of flat cells.
- The dermis is the strong, supportive middle layer of skin that gives the skin its firmness and flexibility.
- The subcutis, also sometimes known as the hypodermis, is the inner layer of skin that consists of fat and connective tissue.

Stretch marks occur in the middle layer of skin (the dermis) when the skin is stretched considerably over a short period of time. The rapid stretching causes the dermis to break in places and allow the deeper layers of the skin to show through, forming stretch marks.

How common are stretch marks?

Stretch marks are very common. Anyone can get them, but they occur more often in women than men. The abdomen (tummy), buttocks and thighs are most commonly affected by stretch marks.

Stretch marks can appear on the skin whenever the skin is stretched as a result of sudden growth. For example, they can appear:

- during [pregnancy](#)
- as a result of weight gain
- as a result of growth spurts during [puberty](#), when the body matures sexually and the reproductive organs become functional

About 9 out of 10 women are affected by stretch marks during pregnancy. Around 7 out of 10 females and 4 out of 10 males develop stretch marks during puberty.

In some cases, stretch marks can also be a symptom of an underlying health condition, such as Cushing's syndrome.

See [Stretch marks - causes](#) for more information about this condition.

Outlook

Stretch marks are not harmful. They do not cause any significant medical problems and there is no specific medical treatment for them. As a result, there is usually no need to see your GP about them.

Over time, the skin will contract (shrink) and the stretch marks will turn into white-coloured scars that are lighter in colour and less obvious. However, they do not usually fade completely.

Some people who have stretch marks find them distressing. If you are concerned or distressed about your stretch marks, discuss possible treatment options with your GP, such as laser therapy or cosmetic surgery.

However, there is no guarantee that these treatments will work for you and there is a lack of evidence that they are effective in treating stretch marks. See [Stretch marks - treatment](#) for more information.

Although there is no way to cure stretch marks completely, you can do a number of things to reduce your risk of developing them, such as looking after your skin and controlling your weight. See [Stretch marks - prevention](#) for more information and advice.

- [show glossary terms](#)

Abdomen

The abdomen is the part of the body between the chest and the hips.

High blood pressure

Hypertension is when the pressure of the blood in your bloodstream is regularly above 140/90 mmHG.

Tissue

Body tissue is made up of groups of cells that perform a specific job, such as protecting the body against infection, producing movement or storing fat.

Last reviewed: 09/08/2010

Next review due: 09/08/2012

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RosieTalk said on 16 May 2011

I have found Bio Oil to be very helpful on acne scars, and I have heard excellent things on what it can do for stretch marks. Worth a go! It is mid-price but lasts a long time. Use morning and evening for best results.

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babsey said on 16 May 2011

Hello, I'm 16 and I've had stretch marks since I was 13, they've never really bothered me but they are still appearing even though my weight and size is stable. They are appearing in place that will be noticeable like above hips and back of my legs. I moisturise with cocoa butter, e45 and body oils. But they still appear :(please some advice would be helpful. I've heard there are vitamin e injections that could help (heard from embarrassing body's channel 4) could I get some more information on this topic please.

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lynjenkins said on 05 September 2010

Diet has helped improve my stretch marks more than anything else. I've cut out all processed foods, coffee, alcohol etc and have progressed to a 100% raw vegan diet. I'm not saying you have to go that extreme but definitely substituting "bad" foods for more fruit and veg helps.

[stretch marks](http://www.stretchmarksfade.co.uk/)

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Musto said on 23 July 2010

Hi, sorry to hear about your stretch marks. It sounds as if you have a healthy diet and that your stretch marks are not a result of being overweight. However, they are clearly causing you some distress, affecting your self esteem and making you self conscious.

You should go to visit your GP who will be able to examine your stretch marks and recommend suitable treatment options. Also, just to let you know that this topic is currently being reviewed and the updated version will be available within the next couple of weeks - good luck!

[Report this content as offensive or unsuitable comment id 8673](#)

yasaybar said on 26 June 2010

hello. I'm 14, nearly 15 and i have bad stretch marks on my inner thighs. I dont think its due to being overweight as i am a size 10 and have never been over just into a size 12. I also didn't have much of a growth spurt as i have always been tall and have only developed the

scars in the last few years. i have a healthy diet, i dont eat fast food, anything processed or sweets, and i only have the right amount of carbs and dairy each day and i eat a lot of fruit and vegetables. i've tried a number of creams and oils, etc. and it has only made them more purple/silver rather than red. my aunt is due to be treated by the nhs for acne and she said she was told that a similar thing could be provided for me, and i've heard some things are free for under 16's. Also, in the "useful links" there is a link to the plastic surgery section, is that appropriate? i dont know what else i'm going to do, i dont show my legs and have refused to go swimming for the last 3 years, i think my mum is concerned with me being so self concious but i can't show my legs how they are now. please reply and tell me if any of the information i've heard is correct. thankyou

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Symptoms of stretch marks

Stretch marks do not affect everyone and some people will not get them. It depends on your skin type. If your skin is more elastic, you are less likely to get stretch marks. If your skin contains a lower amount of collagen (a type of protein that keeps the skin stretchy), you are more likely to get stretch marks.

Stretch marks

An early sign of stretch marks is when the area of affected skin becomes thin, flattened and pink. Initially, the area may also feel itchy.

Stretch marks first appear as red or purple streaks or lines (*striae rubra*) on the surface of your skin. They are slightly raised to the touch and may feel wrinkly. Depending on your skin colour, they may also look pink, reddish brown or dark brown.

The lines will appear purple or pink in colour, before eventually flattening out. As the lines become flatter they will begin to fade and will usually change to a white colour (*striae alba*).

Stretch marks may appear in patches of parallel lines on your body. Your skin over the stretch marks may look thin and silvery and can often look scar-like.

In many cases, stretch marks fade and become less noticeable over time, but this can take years.

Common areas for stretch marks

Stretch marks can appear anywhere on your body where your skin has been stretched. However, they usually occur on the parts of your body where fat is stored, such as your:

- abdomen (tummy)
- buttocks
- thighs
- upper arms
- breasts (in women)

- shoulders of bodybuilders

Stretch marks that are caused by using corticosteroid treatments and by Cushing's syndrome tend to be wider and larger and can also appear on the face.

See [Stretch marks - causes](#) for more information about corticosteroid treatments and

Causes of stretch marks

Stretch marks appear when your skin is suddenly stretched. They occur in the strong middle layer of your skin (the dermis), which supports your skin's outer surface (the epidermis).

The dermis is made up of strong fibres that connect to each other and allow your skin to stretch as your body grows. However, if a part of your body grows rapidly over a short period, the fibres can become thin and over-stretched and some of them may break.

At the point where the fibres in the dermis break, tiny tears develop and the blood vessels that lie underneath show through. This is why stretch marks are a reddish colour when they first appear. Eventually, the blood vessels contract (shrink) to leave only the fat under your skin visible, and the stretch marks fade to a silvery white or grey colour.

Not everyone gets stretch marks. Some people may be more likely to develop stretch marks than others because their bodies produce a larger amount of a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol decreases the amount of collagen in your skin. Collagen is a protein in the skin fibres that helps keep it stretchy.

The main causes of stretch marks include:

- pregnancy
- rapid weight gain
- puberty
- family history of stretch marks
- certain medications
- certain health conditions

These are explained in more detail below.

Pregnancy

If you are pregnant, it is likely that you will develop stretch marks, particularly from the sixth month (second trimester) of your pregnancy.

Hormones that are produced by your body during pregnancy help to soften the ligaments in your pelvis so that they are more flexible when you come to deliver your baby. Ligaments are strong bands of tissue that connect joints. However, these hormones also soften the fibres in your skin, making you prone to stretch marks.

As your baby grows, you may develop stretch marks on your abdomen (tummy) as your skin is gradually stretched further and further. Stretch marks may also appear on your thighs and breasts as they get bigger and heavier.

Over time, most stretch marks will fade to lines that are pale or flesh-coloured after childbirth.

Rapid weight gain

You may get stretch marks if you put on a lot of weight over a short period. The stretch marks may remain even if you lose the weight that you have gained. However, they should fade over time.

If you diet regularly, stretch marks can form as your weight goes up and down rapidly. If you are dieting, it is important to lose weight slowly and steadily so that your skin is not put under strain.

Bodybuilders and athletes can also sometimes get stretch marks as their muscles increase in size.

Puberty

During puberty (the change from childhood to adulthood), the body tends to develop very quickly in growth spurts. As a result, males often get stretch marks on their shoulders and back, and females get them on their hips, thighs and breasts.

See the Health A-Z topic about [Puberty](#) for more information.

Family history

If you have close relatives who have stretch marks (such as your mother), you may be more likely to develop them yourself. Stretch marks may affect both male and female members of your family, although they are more likely to occur in women.

Corticosteroids

You may develop stretch marks if you use corticosteroid medicines, such as creams, lotions or tablets for [eczema](#) (a skin condition that causes itching and redness).

Corticosteroids work in a similar way to the hormone cortisol, which is produced naturally in your body. Medicines that contain corticosteroids can help ease the inflammation that is caused by skin conditions, but they can also decrease the amount of collagen that is in your skin.

Collagen is a type of protein that is needed to keep your skin stretchy. Therefore, the less collagen there is in your skin, the more likely stretch marks are to develop.

See the Health A-Z topic about [Corticosteroids](#) for more information.

Certain health conditions

Sometimes, stretch marks can be caused by rare underlying health conditions, such as Cushing's syndrome and Marfan syndrome.

Cushing's syndrome

Cushing's syndrome occurs when the body produces an excess amount of cortisol, the same hormone that may make some people more prone to developing stretch marks than others.

In Cushing's syndrome, your body produces so much cortisol that it can cause a variety of symptoms, including:

- weight gain
- back pain
- excessive body and facial hair

If you have Cushing's syndrome, you may develop noticeable stretch marks that are dark in colour.

See the Health A-Z topic on [Cushing's syndrome](#) for more information.

Marfan syndrome

Marfan syndrome is caused by a faulty gene that affects your body's connective tissues, including your skin. It weakens your body's tissues and affects their elasticity (ability to stretch), so that your skin is not as resistant to stretch marks as it should be.

If you have Marfan syndrome, you may develop stretch marks on your shoulders, hips or lower back. The condition also causes several other symptoms, such as curvature of the spine (scoliosis) and vision problems.

See the Health A-Z topic about [Marfan syndrome](#) for more

Stretch marks are not harmful and there is usually no need to see your GP about them.

However, if you feel that your stretch marks are unsightly and they are making you unhappy, you can see your GP to discuss possible treatment options. However, there is no guarantee that any particular treatment that is recommended for you will work.

Before making any recommendations, your GP will examine your stretch marks, ask you about any other symptoms that you have and whether or not you are taking any medication.

Underlying health conditions

In rare cases, stretch marks can be a symptom of an underlying health condition such as Cushing's syndrome and Marfan syndrome.

See your GP if your stretch marks do not appear to be linked to changes in your weight or growth, or if you have any of the symptoms associated with Cushing's syndrome or Marfan syndrome (see [Stretch marks - symptoms](#)).

If your GP thinks that your stretch marks may be linked to another condition, they may need to carry out some tests. These may include blood or urine tests and imaging scans, such as an

[X-ray](#) or a [magnetic resonance imaging \(MRI\) scan](#). MRI scans use a strong magnetic field and radio waves to produce images of the inside of your body.

Treating stretch marks

There is no specific medical treatment for stretch marks. In most cases, there is no need to see your GP about them. Most stretch marks are not particularly noticeable and fade over time.

If you have several stretch marks that affect a large part of your body, or if you are worried that they look unsightly, there may be treatments available.

However, there is little or no medical evidence to show that these treatments will work, so it is important to be realistic about what they can achieve.

Creams, gels and lotions

Many creams, gels and lotions claim to be able to remove stretch marks. These products are essentially moisturisers for your skin and are available from pharmacies, supermarkets and health and beauty shops.

It is better to apply creams, gels and lotions to the stretch marks when they are at an early stage (striae rubra) and still purple. However, it is very doubtful that oils or creams can help prevent stretch marks.

Laser therapy

Laser therapy cannot remove stretch marks altogether, but it may help them to fade and appear less obvious.

Several different types of laser therapy may be used to treat stretch marks, such as pulsed dye laser treatment. This type of laser therapy works on early stretch marks (that are still red) by sealing the blood vessels within your skin and speeding up the fading process.

Laser therapy for stretch marks is usually very expensive and it is not available on the NHS. It is likely that you will need many treatments to obtain visible results, but the exact number will depend on your skin colour and type.

Cosmetic surgery

Cosmetic surgery for stretch marks is very expensive and is rarely recommended.

If you have stretch marks on your abdomen (tummy) as well as a large amount of loose skin, it may be possible to have an operation called an abdominoplasty, also known as a tummy tuck. An abdominoplasty removes the excess skin and fat around your abdomen, as well as removing the stretch marks below your belly button at the same time.

As this type of surgery is a cosmetic procedure (used to improve your appearance), it is not available on the NHS. Cosmetic surgery also carries a number of risks and can cause considerable scarring.

See the Health A-Z topic about [Cosmetic surgery](#) for more

Preventing stretch marks

Stretch marks are very common and cannot be prevented altogether. However, the following advice may help reduce your risk of developing stretch marks.

Healthy weight

Gaining weight over a short period is one of the most common causes of stretch marks.

Putting on a lot of weight and diets that cause your weight to change rapidly can cause stretch marks to form because your skin is literally stretched by the sudden growth. Therefore, avoiding rapid weight gain and weight loss can help prevent stretch marks from forming.

If you need to lose weight, do it slowly by eating a healthy, balanced diet and getting plenty of regular exercise. Do not lose more than 0.5 kg (1lb) a week.

To find out whether you are overweight or obese, use the [Body mass index \(BMI\) calculator](#).

Skincare

Massaging your skin every day with moisturiser or a massage glove can help improve your circulation and encourage new tissue growth.

It is also important to eat a healthy, balanced diet that is rich in vitamins and minerals, particularly vitamins E and C and the minerals zinc and silicon. These vitamins and minerals will help keep your skin healthy.

See the Health A-Z topic about [Diet](#) for more information and advice.

During pregnancy

If you are pregnant, it is normal and healthy to put on a significant amount of weight in a short space of time. However, it is a myth that you need to 'eat for two'.

You are more likely to get stretch marks during pregnancy as a result of hormonal changes that affect your skin. However, you may be able to minimise their effect by gaining pregnancy weight steadily.

While you are pregnant, you need to consume approximately 2,500 calories a day. However, this is only 500 calories more than a woman's normal recommended calorie intake.

It is important that these calories come from a well-balanced diet that is rich in wholewheat carbohydrates, such as bread and pasta, as well as fruit and vegetables.

During pregnancy, your weight gain should be slow and gradual. The amount of weight you put on will depend on the weight you were before you became pregnant. It is normal to gain 1-2kg (2.2-4.4lb) over the first 12 weeks of your pregnancy.

As a rough guide, during pregnancy:

- Women who are underweight (have a BMI of less than 18.5) should gain 12.7-18.1kg (28-40lb).
- Women who are a normal weight (have a BMI of 18.5-24.9) should gain 11.3-15.9kg (25-35lb).
- Women who are overweight (have a BMI of more than 25) should gain 6.8-11.3kg (15-25lb).
- Women who are obese (have a BMI of more than 30) should gain 5-9.1kg (11-20lb).

Speak to your GP, midwife or health visitor if you are worried that you are not gaining weight at a healthy rate or if you are concerned about your stretch marks.

Last reviewed: 0 **Stretch marks**

What are they?

Stretch marks look like thin, stretched tissue, and that is more or less what they are. They appear in people who put on or lose weight rapidly. The upper layer of the skin is normal, but in the lower layer the collagen and elastin, which give the skin its strength and elasticity, have become thinner and broken. At first, the marks look reddish-purple. This is because the stretched skin is more transparent and the small blood vessels that lie deep in the skin show through. Later, the blood vessels contract. The purplish colour then fades to white, which is simply fat under the skin showing through.

Who gets them?

- Stretch marks often appear on the breast and abdomen during pregnancy. The reason is partly hormonal. During pregnancy, hormones have the job of softening the collagen ligaments of the pelvis, so that the tissues can stretch easily during childbirth. Unfortunately, the skin collagen softens as well, allowing stretch marks to form easily.
- Some women have weaker collagen than others, so are more likely to get stretch marks. Recent research suggests that if you have stretch marks, your pelvic floor ligaments may be slightly weak, so it is very important to do [pelvic floor exercises](#) after childbirth to prevent incontinence of urine.
- Yo-yo dieters and bodybuilders can get stretch marks on the upper arms, chest and thighs.
- Growing adolescents can get them on their backs, where they look like a series of horizontal lines.

Preventing stretch marks

Try to avoid yo-yo dieting. If you are overweight, aim to lose it slowly (do not aim to lose more than 0.5 kg (1 lb) a week).

If you are pregnant, there is not much you can do except keep your fingers crossed and think, "this is a small price to pay for a beautiful baby!" Rubbing baby oil into the abdomen each night might help. Various special creams and oils are promoted for preventing stretch marks, but there is no proof that they are effective.

Curing stretch marks

Stretch marks are permanent in the sense that the skin in these areas will never be completely normal. However, after a time they contract down into much less obvious, thin, whitish scars.

Collagen creams claim that they will improve stretch marks. There is no evidence that they do so. In fact, collagen and elastin put onto the surface of the skin can not penetrate into the deeper layers.

Cocoa butter cream, which is available from pharmacies, is often recommended to soften scars, so might be worth a try.

Lasers can be used to treat stretch marks at an early stage, when they are still red. The red blood cells in the small blood vessels absorb the energy from the laser beam and convert it into heat, which then seals the blood vessels. This gets rid of the red colour and might speed up the contracting process, but is uncertain whether it will make any difference in the long run.

It costs several hundred pounds, and can not be done under the National Health Service in the UK. As with any cosmetic treatment, check that the clinic is reputable; your doctor can probably advise you, and look at the section on [cosmetic surgery](#).

Tretinoin is another approach to the treatment of early stretch marks. There have been claims that this produces improvement, but other researchers have not found any effect (*Cutis* 1994;54:121–4).

Surgery is a possibility for tummy stretch marks if you also have a lot of loose skin on the tummy. The operation is a 'tummy tuck' (removal of the skin and the fatty tissue beneath). You will be left with scars around the belly button and across the lower stomach. This is not a minor operation and, like all operations, it carries risks. Recovery takes several weeks. Look at the section on [cosmetic surgery](#).

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