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BLURRED LINES

Self-conscious about stretch marks or scars? Find natural ways to keep their appearance to a minimum.

BY CELIA SHATZMAN

• **SUPERMODELS HAVE** them. So do A-list actresses, your family members, and your friends—and chances are you do, too. We're talking stretch marks, which occur in up to 80% of the population. And even though they're supercommon, there still isn't an easy way to get rid of them. The same thing goes for scars, which tend to stay with you for life. Here's what you can do to minimize marks and feel better when you bare it all.

ANATOMY OF A SCAR

Scars can occur anywhere a wound heals. "Depressed or raised scars happen when the body is mending damage in the deep layers of the skin," says Dendy Engelman, M.D., a New York City-based dermatologic surgeon. "The new collagen created to replace the damage can have a different texture, which results in a raised or indented scar."

Stretch marks are actually a type of scar. "Stretch

marks, or striae, are the thin streaks or lines that develop on the skin's surface when the skin is stretched beyond its elastic capacity," explains Paul Jarrod Frank, M.D., a cosmetic dermatologist and the founder of PFrankMD. "When a part of the body grows in a short amount of time, the fibers in the middle layer of skin, or the dermis, can break and cause small tears in the tissue. These tears can reveal blood vessels in the deeper skin layers, resulting in pink, red, or purple lines on the skin's surface. Eventually, as the blood vessels contract, the discoloration will fade and the streaks may look similar to a scar."

Though our skin is amazingly resilient, a rapid body change—such as during puberty, pregnancy, major weight gain, or a growth spurt—can literally leave its mark. Stretch marks can appear anywhere on the body, but they're most likely to crop up in places with larger fat deposits, including the abdomen, butt, breasts, and thighs. They're more common among women.

The size of a scar largely depends on the elasticity and thickness of skin. Genetics and ethnicity can influence both. "Darker skin types may form enlarged scars," says Charlene DeHaven, M.D., clinical director for Innovative Skincare.

MINIMIZE THE MARKS

While you can't control your genes, you can take steps to reduce the appearance of stretch marks and scars.

› **Invest in the right ingredients.** Start by keeping your skin hydrated, which makes it more supple. "Topical creams and treatments help strengthen the skin," Engelman says. Products containing ginkgo or caffeine can also help improve circulation when massaged in skin daily, which in turn helps smooth skin appearance and minimize dimpling, and

those with antioxidants can also help heal wounds. Other helpful ingredients include *Centella asiatica* (an Ayurvedic wound healer) and nutritional building blocks, such as amino acids used in protein synthesis and regeneration of healthy new tissue. For fair to medium skin tones, a good self-tanner can help mask white lines. Finally, consider using topical vitamin A derivatives like retinol and prescription retinoids, which can make stretch marks less apparent. A 2014 study published in the *American Society of Dermatologic Surgery* found that when a prescription retinoid was used daily over 16 weeks, it helped reduce the appearance of newer, red stretch marks.

› **Mind the sun.** Apply a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 every day—rain or shine—and reapply every two hours if you're sweating, swimming, or doing a workout that may cause the sunscreen to rub off. "Avoid extra sun exposure that increases free radical damage to skin and compromises your ability to generate new tissue," DeHaven says.

› **Take it slow.** While working out is usually a good thing, remember that adding muscle too quickly can lead to changes in the skin. "Try to maintain a healthy weight while slowly building muscle," Engelman says.

› **Be proactive.** It's a lot easier to prevent stretch marks and scars than to heal

them. Follow a balanced diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins A, B, and E, and antioxidants, all of which can help support healthy skin. If you're actively trying to build muscle, this is where keeping skin hydrated comes in handy. And if you do have a fresh wound that has the potential to turn into a scar, be sure to treat it as it heals so that it leaves the most minimal mark possible. Some experts recommend shea butter to help prevent stretch marks, particularly during pregnancy, but research on its efficacy is hazy.

› **Take action quickly.** The longer you have a mark, the harder it is to treat—ideally, treat it when the scar is still red or pink. "This is the inflammatory stage, when marks heal fastest," Frank says. "When they turn white, they are much harder to treat to see a good result."

› **See your doc.** When topical treatments fail, the next option is to turn to a pro, but keep in mind that most treatments can set you back hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars. For a more aggressive approach, Frank has three go-to procedures. There's the VBeam Laser, which addresses skin redness and texture when stretch marks are relatively new; Fraxel Restore, a resurfacing laser that targets older, white scars; and Infini Microneedling with Fraxel that combines radio frequency and micro-needling to precise depths in the skin to stimulate collagen production exactly where it is needed.

OUT OF LINE

These derm-approved treatments can help minimize the appearance of stretch marks and scars.

1 PALMER'S COCOA BUTTER FORMULA MASSAGE LOTION FOR STRETCH MARKS

contains moisturizers to soften skin and boost its hydration levels. (\$5; Walmart)

2 IS CLINICAL SHEALD RECOVERY BALM

is a fortifying moisturizer that minimizes marks by delivering a hearty dose of hydration. (\$72; dermstore.com)

3 **BIO-OIL** is a blend of oils chosen for their healing abilities. "During my pregnancy, I used it all over my body," says Engelman. "It helps prevent stretch marks." (\$15; Target)

4 **SERICA** scar gel is made with a 50% silicone base plus Amazonian pracaxi oil, which helps expedite the healing of both old and new stretch marks. (\$35-\$40; Walgreens)

5 Petroleum-based moisturizers like **VASELINE INTENSIVE CARE COCOA RADIANT SMOOTHING BODY BUTTER** form a protective barrier over the skin, allowing it to heal. (\$6; Target)

6 **BODY BOOST STRETCH MARK BUTTER** contains organic ingredients like collagen to give your skin the nutrients it needs to prevent and repair stretch marks. (\$15; bodyboostnyc.com)

