

What are stretch marks?

Stretch Marks, also known as “Striae”, “Striae Atrophica” or “Striae Distensae”, are actually a form of dermal scarring. When an individual undergoes a rapid growth spurt, the skin can only increase its rate of cell division to a certain extent to keep up with that growth and maintain coverage of the structures underneath. Because of how the body grows, the most common areas for stretch marks to occur are the abdomen, hips, buttocks, thighs, upper arms, and chest, but they can and do occur in other areas as well.

What causes stretch marks?

The most common causes of stretch marks are rapid weight gain, growth spurts during puberty, pregnancy, rapid breast enlargement or implants, and fast muscle growth with weightlifting or steroid use. Some individuals of darker skin types develop marks on the thighs or buttocks without ever experiencing any of these circumstances.

Additionally, medical conditions that create high levels of circulating glucocorticoids or conditions that require treatment with these steroids can lead to stretch marks, as these prevent a specialized cell called the fibroblast from making the collagen necessary to maintain dermal integrity.

How are stretch marks formed?

When growth occurs faster than the skin can keep up with, the skin is forced to stretch to accommodate that growth. As this happens, the collagen and elastin structures in the dermal layer of the skin are pulled apart in order to allow that stretching to happen. Once this occurs, that area of the dermis can never be the same again. The dermis will repair itself by making new collagen eventually to help fill the gaps, but the epidermal changes that result above the stretched dermis are permanent. Because the strength and structure of the dermis has been compromised, it shows in the surface of the skin as what we see as the stretch mark.

Since the “scaffold” of the skin has been compromised in that area, the skin often sinks in and is depressed. This, however, is not always the most apparent feature of the stretch mark. Stretch marks can be darker or lighter in color (hyper or hypo-pigmented), they can look red, purple, or silvery in color, they can be almost flat or they can have a “crepey” or “wrinkly” look and feel. More often than not, most stretch marks combine at least a couple of these features in their surface appearance.