

MOM BELLIES



For nine months, your abdomen was where all the action happened. And yet since your baby's arrival, you may find yourself puzzling, marveling, and, yes, stressing about how much has changed down there. Five moms share the different ways they got over the hump of belly hatred and came to love their mom bods. Plus, experts offer insights and answers on how you can too.

by **JENNIFER KING LINDLEY** / illustrations by **STEPHANIE DeANGELIS**

WANT TO HEAR a tale of stunning transformation? Here's one: It's called "The Story of Your Belly." You see, over the course of a healthy pregnancy, your uterus grows from the size of a pear to the size of a watermelon. That process *streeeeetches* out your abdominal muscles and the connective tissue that holds those muscles in place. In some cases, the tissue down the middle of what would be your six-pack overstretches, creating a gap that may last long after delivery. Belly skin gets stretched out, too, and might never go back to its original tautness. "The more

weight you lose, the looser it looks," says Karen Horton, M.D., a plastic surgeon in San Francisco. Stretch marks happen when the skin's collagen layer tears and scars. Once these marks appear, you get to keep them.

Then there's the pudge. A woman typically gains nearly 7 pounds of fat while pregnant. And, yes, some of it may get too comfortable and not want to leave, ever.

If you had a C-section, you might end up with a "C-section shelf." OBs stitch your fascia back together and close up your skin after they deliver your baby, but they rarely sew back together the fat

layers in between, explains Dr. Horton. The result can be an indented scar that your belly fat awkwardly hangs over.

How easily you "bounce back" from all these changes depends on a number of factors, including how many pregnancies you've had, how much weight you gained, how much time you have for self-care, and the good old genetic luck of the draw. So how can you process all this change—and come out on the other side feeling confident and happy? Each of these five women did it her own way. Here, they share their emotional journeys.



to the pressure to try to look thin. Then, two-and-a-half years later, I gave birth prematurely to Holden and Theodore, identical twins who had suffered from twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome, a disease of the placenta. I held Theodore for the 30 minutes that he lived and as he passed away in my arms. I met Holden after he was delivered stillborn. I found myself leaving the hospital a day later with a swollen belly and my breasts aching from milk, but with no babies to feed. Irrationally, I hated my body for not being able to save them.

On Valentine's Day 2017, I found out that I was pregnant with our fourth baby, Hugo. It was a difficult and complicated pregnancy. I was still deep in grief. All I wanted was to bring home a live baby. I watched my belly hold him

and grow, despite my emotional and physical pain.

Hugo is now a happy, healthy 6-month-old. William will soon be turning 4. Recently, I stood up and my pants sagged around my waist. I looked in the mirror and noticed that my belly was starting to flatten out again. My first thought, immediate and unfiltered, was an excited "I've lost weight!" But contemplating my reflection, I realized: I don't get a prize for taking up less space. This is the way I look after four babies. My body is forever changed with stretch marks and sagging skin and fat where there once wasn't. Each pregnancy has added different marks and shapes and scars. With my twins, that's all I have left of those babies. Motherhood changes your body. And that's okay—it's even miraculous.

CAN YOU PREVENT STRETCH MARKS?

Maybe. Stretch marks occur when your body expands faster than your skin does. Whether you get them depends mostly on your pregnancy and your genetics, says dermatologist Dendy Engelman, M.D. But there is one factor you can control, and that's whether or not your skin is moisturized and hydrated. "The more pliable your skin is, the less chance there is that stretch marks will appear," Dr. Engelman explains. During her last pregnancy, she layered a few different moisturizers on her belly every day, including Bio-Oil and Serica Moisturizing Stretch Mark Formula (it has a 50 percent silicone base and contains Amazonian pracaxi oil), which she says helps with healing. If you're no longer pregnant or breastfeeding and want to diminish the appearance of stretch marks you already have, topical and prescription retinoids are your best bet.

What Derms Can Do

If surgery seems extreme, consider one of these in-office dermatological procedures. (Yes, they work!)

● ZAP YOUR FAT.

If you have noticeable bulges of unwanted fat that you'd like to get rid of—including around your belly—then you're a candidate for a body-contouring treatment that freezes (try CoolSculpting, \$2,000 to \$4,000 per treatment plan) or heats (try SculpSure, starts at \$1,300) fat cells. The treatments are only mildly uncomfortable, and there is no downtime for recovery. It may take a few sessions to see results.

● SUPERCHARGE YOUR MUSCLES.

In a 30-minute session (ideally, you'll do four within two weeks), the BTL Emsculpt uses high-frequency electromagnetic energy to contract your abdominal muscles. It's the equivalent of 20,000 crunches or 20,000 squats, says dermatologic surgeon Dendy Engelman, M.D. Studies have shown an 11 percent decrease in diastasis recti and a 23 percent fat reduction over a six-month period. Cost: up to \$1,000 per session.

● TIGHTEN YOUR SKIN.

Devices that use radio-frequency energy (such as Thermage, \$2,500) stimulate the cells in the deeper layers of your skin to produce more collagen, which can help to firm skin. Results can take about six months to materialize.

—Kate Sandoval Box