

Transformation?

A person's body undergoes many transformations during the nine months of pregnancy. Some of these physical changes are visible, such as an expanding belly, breast size increases and weight gain, while others are well known, such as an enlarged uterus, possible morning sickness and backaches. However, a few bodily changes may be unexpected and may catch some people by surprise. Let's take a look at some of these.

The breasts tend to enlarge because hormones (mainly estrogen) are preparing the breasts for milk production. The glands that produce milk gradually increase in number and become able to produce milk. Your breasts may feel firm and a little more tender. Wearing a bra that fits properly and provides support may help, consider not wearing your underwire bras as these can put pressure on your breast which may lead to blocked milk ducts or mastitis.

A second unanticipated change is varicose veins in the genitals (sounds dramatic but nothing to be worried about), many people expect varicose veins in their legs during pregnancy, but veins near the vagina and vulva can also become swollen and pop out (usually in the third trimester). Although swollen veins in this area can be uncomfortable, they tend to go away after delivery, if you have any concerns or they are sore, have a chat with your LMC or health care provider.

Bleeding gums are a common pregnancy complaint, and they may create an open portal to infections. People are more susceptible to infections during pregnancy because the immune system lowers so you can carry your baby. It's really important to keep up with oral hygiene to prevent gingivitis, or inflammation of the gums.

Luscious locks are usually a blessing for many during pregnancy (yay!), this is due to the increase of estrogen which increases the length of the 'growing phase' of hair follicles often resulting in a thicker and healthier looking head of hair. You may not only get more hair on your head, but also more hair growth on your body — sometimes in unwanted places, such as the upper lip, stomach, back and nipples!

As estrogen levels fall after giving birth, people may shed more hair, you might see clumps of hair falling out after a shower or brushing, which is a normal occurrence. Most find their hair returns to its normal growth and texture within four to six months after giving birth.

There also tends to be a coarsening of the texture of nails during pregnancy, making them more brittle and soft, and they may split more easily. Nail changes are usually a result of increased blood flow to the fingers and toes due to increased estrogen levels, like your hair, nails also tend to grow faster when pregnant, making them good targets for manicures and pedicures (bliss).

Skin changes are very common during pregnancy, but the ones that tend to be the most bothersome are stretch marks. These pinkish, purplish lines are typically seen on a person's abdomen, breasts, backside or thighs, and they can be quite itchy! They may be caused by a breakdown of collagen or connective tissue that supports the skin, in areas where the skin has had rapid growth and stretched. There is nothing that will prevent stretch marks, however, a gentle moisturizer or cold-pressed organic oil may ease the itchiness! Stretch marks also typically shrink after giving birth and become less noticeable - be proud of them and regard them as your 'tiger stripes', you have earned them!



Other changes such as pigment changes to your skin can happen too, such as the melasma commonly known as the "mask of pregnancy". These brownish patches of darkened skin may appear on your face around your eyes and over your cheeks and nose, due to an increase in melanin, a pigment that gives skin its colour. In addition, fluctuating hormone levels can produce a dark line in the middle of your abdomen running from your belly button to your pubic bone. Known as linea negra, this pigment change is usually more common in women with a dark complexion, and it often fades after delivery. Pigment changes can also cause freckles and moles to darken and enlarge during pregnancy. Acne may also worsen during pregnancy or result in breakouts in women who had clear complexions prior to pregnancy. Hormonal shifts that cause the skin to secrete more oil are likely responsible for the flare-ups.

Body temperature will increase, making you feel warmer and sweaty (yuck!) this is due to an increased metabolic rate and increased sweat gland activity. To stay cool, especially on our hot Hawke's Bay summer, I recommended that you wear loose clothing (cotton if possible) and drink plenty of water every day. A great way to know that you are getting enough water is when your urine looks pale yellow or clear and not dark yellow or the colour of tea. However, if you are taking vitamins, these may turn your urine bright yellow, have a chat with your LMC if you are unsure.

Your joints and ligaments (fibrous cords and cartilage that connect bones) in your pelvis will loosen and become more flexible. Your body is secreting pregnancy hormones, including one known as relaxin, to loosen joints and ligaments. Relaxin not only relaxes ligaments in your pelvis to prepare you for labour and delivery, but it also stretches joints and ligaments all over your body. This can lead to back pain and sciatica, or pain along the sciatic nerve — which starts in the lower back and runs through the backside and down the leg. Relaxin is also responsible for the "pregnancy waddle," an altered walk resulting from a bigger belly and an increased curvature of your spine. If you are having pelvic pain that is impacting your day to day activities (or sleep), I recommend you chat with Leanne Wait from 'Muma Care' in Havelock North, she will be able to assess you and come up with a supportive course of action.

Backache in varying degrees is common because your spine curves more to balance the weight of your enlarging uterus. Avoiding heavy lifting, bending at your knees (not your waist) to pick things up, and maintaining good posture can help. Wearing flat shoes with good support or a lightweight maternity belt - such as a 'smiley belt' may reduce strain on your back.

Last but not least, some people say their feet grow an entire shoe size during pregnancy! Your feet can grow for a few reasons. Your foot is made up of 26 bones and more than 30 joints that are held together by a network of ligaments. During pregnancy, there's a relaxation, or loosening, of the ligaments as mentioned above, weight gain also contributes. Now that your body weighs more, it puts more strain and stress on your feet, which can cause the joints to widen. A few small studies have suggested that arches in your feet flatten out and swelling in your feet and ankles may also occur because the body is producing extra fluids that might 'pool' in these two locations. Compression stockings, regular massage and cardiovascular exercise (as long as your LMC or health care provider has okayed it) can all help control foot swelling. You can also elevate your feet at the end of the day, while they're elevated, point and flex at the ankles—up to 50 times!—to help bring excess fluid up from the feet and legs.

