



What to Expect After You're Done Expecting

*Your guide to all the wonderful weird things
having a baby does to your body*

DR. PAUL M. PARKER

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What Happens to Your Body During Pregnancy

Why am I so oily? Why is there a hair there? Is it supposed to be that color “down there?!” MY BOOBS LOOK GREAT!

Covers of pregnancy books, pregnant characters on-screen, and wistful older female relatives can lead anyone to believe pregnancy is a magical, glorious time. While that may be true, any mom who has recently been through it will also tell you that there are certain aspects of pregnancy that are anything but magical—and, in fact, may be strange, confusing, or even horrifying.

While most texts focus on your developing baby’s health, it’s also important to get the low-down on what to expect from your own body when you’re expecting. So here’s our head-to-toe guide!



They’re saying, “*you’ve got that pregnancy glow!*”

Real life experience: your skin is blotchy & your hair is kinda oily.

Thanks to unruly hormones, you’ll likely notice some of the first changes in your hair and facial skin.

Brownish yellow patches around the eyes and on the cheeks and nose are common and is called chloasma. Sometimes known as the “mask of pregnancy,” this hyperpigmentation is **estimated to affect 50-75% of expecting moms**. Sun exposure can intensify the color changes, so be sure to wear chemical-free SPF and a stylish sun hat when outside. But don’t worry! This excess of melanin is usually temporary, typically disappearing after birth.

You may notice **changes in the texture and growth of your hair** during pregnancy. Some women experience quicker growth and stronger strands, while others have the opposite problem, with slow

growth, more breakage, and a limp appearance. You may even notice that your natural curls look a bit stringy or that your fine, straight hair has a certain new wave to it.

Not all changes are undesired; and it is true you’ll likely have a nice glow. Why? During pregnancy, your body produces more blood, which increases blood circulation to the face and body, **making your skin look brighter**. Unfortunately, sometimes that **glow transitions into a greasy-looking mess**, caused by an increased production of hormones that can send your oil glands into overdrive.

Not everyone has the same skin changes. **Puffiness, a swollen nose, broken capillaries, and redness** are some other fun side effects you may experience.

Prepare to hardly recognize your breasts

Breasts come in all shapes and sizes—and whether or not you think yours are too big, too small, or *juuuuust* right, it's likely that you're pretty attached to them. Well, prepare yourself for a bumpy ride because your breasts will be going through a number of changes!

General breast soreness or tenderness on contact are very common, as the same increased blood flow we mentioned in the last section makes your breasts feel swollen and sensitive. This is one of the earliest signs of pregnancy and feels like a heightened version of the sensitivity some women experience during menstruation.

Doc Talk

“Your normal skincare routine may not be the right fit during pregnancy, as your skin is not behaving in the same way it was previously. You may find that you have newfound sensitivities to your favorite products or that you aren't quite sure how to address new concerns. Because of this and the many ingredients that are off-limits for pregnant women, it's important to work with a highly trained and experienced professional, such as a medical aesthetician or dermatologist. With a little expert guidance, you can make sure you are choosing products that will help rather than harm. Plus, it's the perfect opportunity to treat yourself a little by scheduling a facial or other specialty skin treatment to help help you unwind.”

Angela Parisi, Nurse Coordinator & Injector at the Parker Center

A couple of months in, you'll likely notice that your **breasts are getting bigger as your body begins preparing for milk production**. How much your breasts will grow varies, but many women upsize by one to two cups. Enjoy your more voluptuous bust while you can—it's typical for your breasts to go back to their natural size after you are done breastfeeding.

Bumps, veins, weird colors, oh my! You may find that your **nipples are bigger, areolas are darker than before, you can see your veins under your breast skin, or bumps are popping up on your areolas**. All these changes are a perfectly normal response to hormonal changes and your body preparing for nursing.

The good news is that these breast changes are typically temporary! Most women notice their breasts going back to normal after pregnancy and nursing. That being said, size fluctuations *can* have a permanent impact on the elasticity of your breast skin, so you may experience some drooping or a “deflated” appearance post-childbearing.



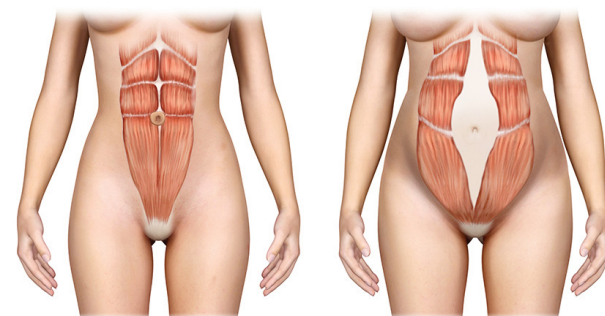
Make room for baby...and say “so long” to your abs (for now)

As expected when you’re expecting, your middle will go through the most noticeable and long-lasting changes. As your little guy or gal grows, so will your tummy—and with these changes come some unwelcome side effects.

A combination of genetics, your lifestyle habits, and the growth rate of your baby all contribute to just how much your abdomen will enlarge, but the club of women with teeny tiny baby bumps is relatively small. **Expect to earn a few stretch marks** along the way, as your skin rapidly expands as the fetus grows larger during the later stages of pregnancy. These marks are actually tears in the dermis and while some women may be more susceptible to them than others, they are perfectly normal.

This stretching can also **decrease the elasticity of your skin**, leading to a “pregnancy pouch.” When skin is stretched beyond a certain point, it doesn’t always bounce back—leaving many new moms with excess drooping skin on the lower abdomen.

Abdominal separation is an unpleasant occurrence many women experience. This condition, known as diastasis recti, occurs when the abdominal muscles widen to accommodate the growing baby. It varies in severity, with some women noticing improvement after childbirth and with toning exercises and others requiring surgical intervention to repair the separation.



Abdominal separation during pregnancy

What’s happening below the belt

Though the most obvious changes occur in the midsection, you’ll likely see a few surprising things happen to your vagina and surrounding areas.

Chadwick’s sign, or a bluish purple hue in the vaginal area, is a perfect example of something totally bizarre (but totally normal) that can happen. This change in color can occur very early on and is often a first clue that you are pregnant. Increased blood flow is what lends the blue color to the cervix, vagina, and labia, and it is nothing to be concerned about. Other visual changes include the appearance of **varicose veins on the vulva and swollen labia**.

You may also notice that things **smell a little different**. A combination of excess vaginal bacteria (often caused by hormone fluctuations) plus a change to the pH of your vagina can lead to changes in vaginal odor *and* taste.

Doc Talk

“Tummy tuck surgery is not only used to address cosmetic concerns, such as sagging skin after pregnancy. It is often a necessity for women whose abdominal muscles have separated to the point where no amount of exercise will improve the condition. In these cases, diastasis recti can be an exceedingly uncomfortable condition that makes even simple tasks like bending over or picking up your child difficult or painful. For these women, surgery is often the only answer.”

*Dr. Paul M. Parker,
Medical Director of Parker Center*

Itchiness, sensitivity, and excess discharge can also occur, and your risk of yeast infection may increase. But don't panic—and never douche! A nutritious, low-sugar diet is the first line of defense for keeping vaginal pH on track. If you have uncomfortable symptoms or feel concerned about anything, check in with your doctor rather than attempting self-treatment.

In terms of function, many moms-to-be will experience more **urinary urgency or even difficulty “holding it in.”** Leaking a little after a sneeze, laughing fit, or gym session can be inconvenient and embarrassing, but it's a common occurrence. Increased blood flow to the kidneys means you need to urinate more frequently—and added pressure on the bladder can make every trip to the bathroom feel like an emergency. Luckily, this is such a common symptom everyone around you will understand if you need to run to the WC every half hour.

All hope is not lost!

While there are many things outside of your control, there are a few things you can do to continue taking care of yourself and maybe even minimize some of these effects.



Do continue your exercise routine. Not only can exercise make you feel better mentally, emotionally, and physically, it can also help improve muscle tone and strength. While this won't necessarily prevent the above body changes from occurring, it can help you rebound a bit better. Just be sure to check with your doctor as you approach the final stretch, or if your routine is exceedingly strenuous.

Do use doc-approved products. While stretch marks and skin laxity aren't completely preventable, taking care of your skin with a quality moisturizer can improve skin health so it can better withstand all the stretching that occurs. Just make sure the products you use have your physician's seal of approval.

Do sleep lots & drink plenty of water. This is pretty obvious, but don't underestimate the power of a great night's sleep and making sure you're drinking enough during the day.

Do work with your aesthetician or dermatologist to address any skin concerns and make sure you're using products that are both safe for pregnant women and a good fit for your changing skin.





Don't overindulge. If you're having a rough preggo day, we're all for grabbing a bowl of ice cream. However, don't get the wrong idea about "eating for two"—over the course of pregnancy, moms actually only need about 100 - 300 extra calories per day (not double your normal intake). You and baby will do best if the calories you add come from nutritious whole foods, so satisfy cravings with veggies, berries, nuts, healthy carbs, and lean protein. While an occasional treat is fine, avoid consuming lots of empty calories as they can have a negative impact on both your mental and physical wellbeing.



Don't skip out on vitamins. Whether you take a supplement or make sure to eat a balanced diet of healthy, whole foods, giving your body the proper nutrients is exceptionally important.

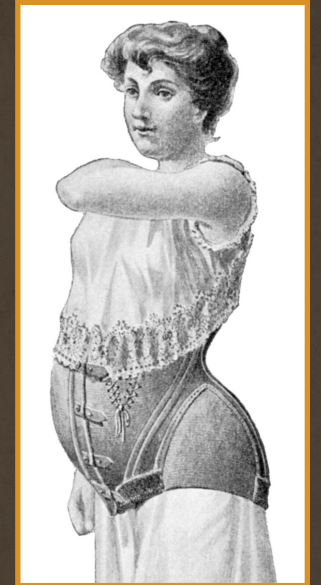
Don't stress out. Easier said than done, eh? Whether you're upset over a new stretch mark, worried about becoming a mom, or just dealing with normal day-to-day stressors, it's important to keep anxiety in check. Stress is dangerous for anyone, but pregnant moms need to be particularly careful. Call in that owed foot rub and remind yourself: que sera, sera.

Beer, Cakes, & Corsets, Oh My

A BRIEF LOOK AT PREGNANCY THROUGH THE AGES

Pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood are not easy to conquer, even in the 21st century. But can you imagine the time before safe pain relief, comfy maternity wear, and a modern understanding of the human anatomy? Here are a few hints.

- ▶ Women who couldn't get pregnant would receive some fairly strange medical advice. In fact, 16th century French queen Catherine de Medici was told to **drink mare's urine and soak her nether region in cow manure and ground antlers** to improve her fertility.
- ▶ If you were in 17th century France, chances are you'd be **giving birth in the same bed as multiple other women.**
- ▶ Using a pain reliever during childbirth might've led to being **burned at the stake** in the middle ages, which is what happened to Eufame Maclayne when she *asked* for some relief while birthing twins.
- ▶ The last trimester of pregnancy can be particularly uncomfortable, which is what makes the idea of **restrictive pregnancy corsets** from the 1800s so horrifying. These garments disguised pregnant tummies—in addition to causing discomfort and negatively impacting the health of the mother.
- ▶ Soon-to-be moms were often expected to **entertain guests with food and drink**, typically handmade, which were referred to as "groaning cakes" and "groaning beer" in the 18th century. It was routine for birthing mothers and their midwives to drink the groaning beer during labor.



A pregnant woman wearing a corset

So, You've Had a Baby. Now What?!

You've just birthed a human being—and that's an incredible, impressive feat! Your body did some pretty magical things in growing and bringing your little one into the world, so it's important to be patient with it. Things won't bounce back immediately, and that's okay.

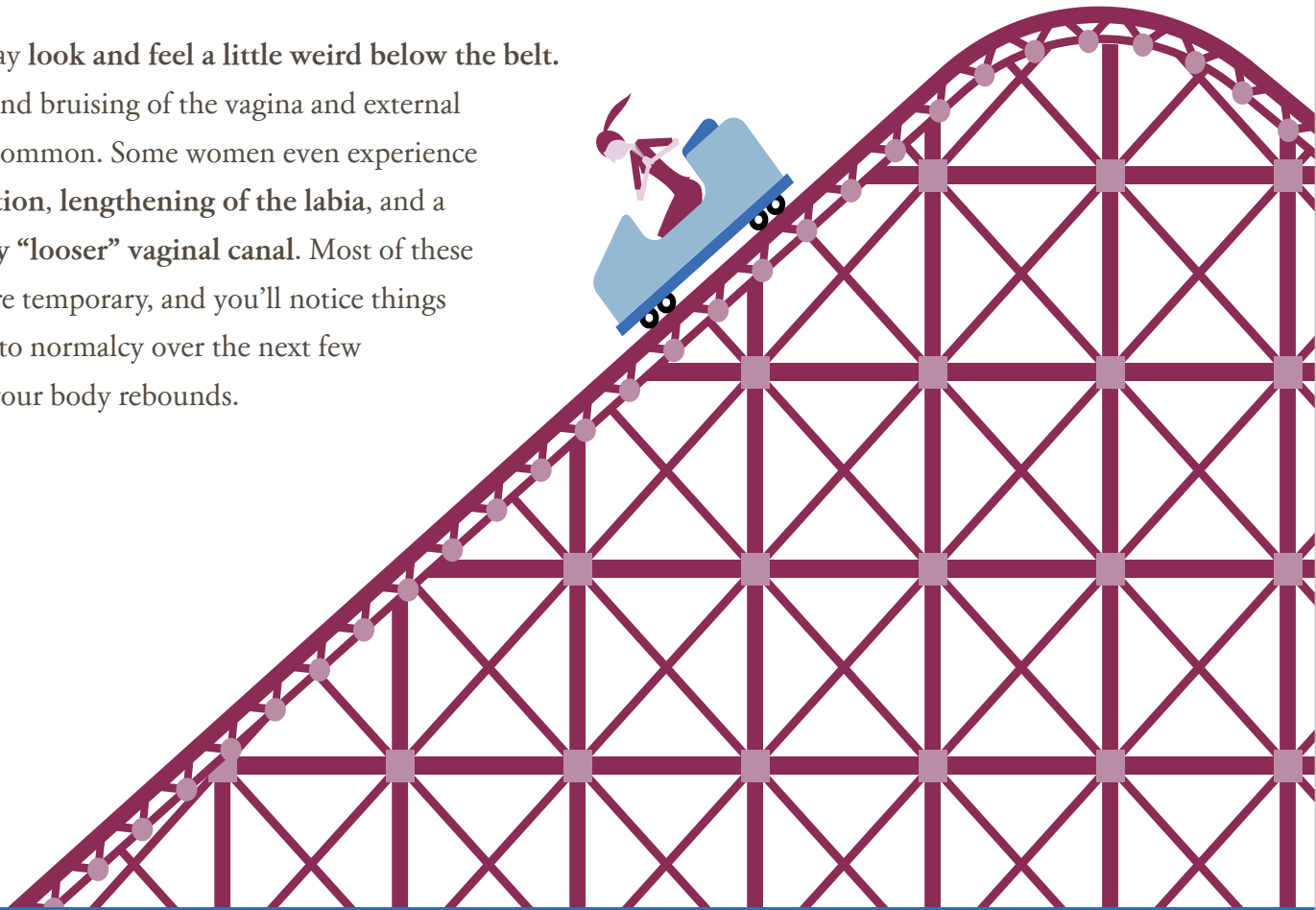


The first few months are a rollercoaster

Almost immediately after you give birth, whether vaginally or via c-section, your body starts to heal—but the process can feel slow. You've been sharing your body with a growing human for months, and it will take time for you to adjust to not being pregnant anymore. **Here's what's happening:**

- ▶ Almost immediately after delivery, you'll experience a **hormonal shift that can cause emotional and physical responses**, such as shaking, excess sweating, and difficulty getting a grasp on emotional ups and downs. It is **perfectly normal to experience the blues**, but if you're noticing any signs of postpartum depression, be sure to speak with your doctor. It is a common response and nothing to be ashamed of, but it's important to get the support you need.
- ▶ **You may pee on yourself.** Delivering a baby can impact your bladder, sometimes causing swelling and loss of sensitivity—which means you may not be able to tell when you have to urinate for a few days.
- ▶ You may see some **spots of blood in your underwear**. Seeing unexpected blood can be alarming, but this is a natural response called “lochia”—and it is a common occurrence until your vaginal lining is renewed. Lochia contains a combo of blood, uterine tissue, and discharge. It typically **starts out brighter red and then becomes increasingly lighter over the course of 10-14 days**. If you are still spotting after four weeks, schedule a checkup with your OB GYN.
- ▶ Behind the curtains, your uterus is going through a number of changes. Namely, it's **shrinking from about the size of an average watermelon to the more normal size of your fist**. This process begins right away and continues for about **four to six weeks**, during which time it's normal to feel a bit of cramping or abdominal achiness. This also means a little pooch is entirely unavoidable during this time.

- While it can take a while to return to your pre-pregnancy weight—and everyone’s timeline for this is different—**expect to drop 10-15 pounds right away** after your baby is born. That weight accounts for baby, your placenta, blood, and amniotic fluid.
- Your breasts will likely get even fuller** as they fill with milk. With the extra fullness sometimes comes tenderness or even discomfort of the neck and shoulders since you’re not used to the extra weight.
- If you delivered vaginally, **your vagina and vulva are going to be sore for up to two months**—you just pushed a human out of there! The perineum, or area between the vagina and rectum, is often the epicenter of discomfort, particularly if you are still healing from any tearing that occurred.
- Things may look and feel a little weird below the belt. Swelling and bruising of the vagina and external tissues is common. Some women even experience **discoloration, lengthening of the labia, and a noticeably “looser” vaginal canal**. Most of these changes are temporary, and you’ll notice things returning to normalcy over the next few weeks as your body rebounds.



Supporting your body as it heals

Certain body changes and weird occurrences are entirely unavoidable, but there are things you can do to minimize their lasting impact and help yourself feel better overall so you can focus on bonding with baby.

Start slow when it comes to exercise. Remember, your body is healing! Make sure you have approval from your doc to hit the gym and listen to your body as you work out. It’s easy to overdo it—and if you aren’t gentle with yourself, you could set your progress back.

Don’t get discouraged. Returning to normalcy is a process, and there are no deadlines to meet. It will take time to look and feel like yourself. Rather than obsessing over the numbers on the scale, work toward feeling good about what you eat, sticking with whole foods that help you feel energized, and regaining strength. Skipping meals, trying weight loss supplements, or detoxing should all be avoided.



Why Don't I Look Like *Me* Anymore?

Don't compare. Every body is different. Big name celebs who look practically perfect weeks after giving birth have access to nutritionists, professional chefs, renowned personal trainers, and the ability to devote tons of time to themselves—not to mention professional photography, lighting, and retouching.

Give kegel exercises a try. Just like your abs, the muscle tone of your vagina is greatly impacted by pregnancy and childbirth. Kegel exercises engage the same muscles you use to stop or start urine—and strengthening these areas can help better support your pelvic floor. That means improved bladder function (and, often, more enjoyable intimacy). Kegels hard to remember? **Specialty products, like Ben-Wa balls or kegel trainers** can help you make sure you're getting the most out of the exercise.

Keep a line of communication with your doctor. Don't be afraid to chat with your physician about anything that feels out of the norm. It's likely perfectly normal, but it's best to be sure and stay on top of your health.

Know that some things are out of your control. No matter how many situps you do, severe separation of abdominal muscles is incredibly difficult to repair—meaning you may not be able to get rid of your “pregnancy pooch” on your own. And sometimes kegels simply aren't enough to help your pelvic floor or bladder. If that's the case and you are suffering or feeling embarrassed, ask your physician about the latest medical options for correcting these issues.

Barring the lucky few who—thanks to the perfect formula of the right genes, intense diet and exercise habits, and perhaps a little witchcraft—seem to bounce back to their pre-baby body right away, most moms will notice their bodies simply don't look the way they did before.



Your Transformed Torso

The majority of postpartum women will tell you that their abdomens are the most unrecognizable after pregnancy and childbirth—and sometimes things just don't shrink back to pre-baby appearance. As described in previous sections, your tummy went through some pretty drastic changes to accommodate your growing baby, and there are limits to the elasticity of your skin.

“I've been really focused on not being ‘back’ to anything but being the best version of myself right now. My body is the site of a miracle now. I don't want to be pre-miracle.”

—Kerry Washington

Coupled with the fact that your body is still recovering from pregnancy and childbirth, these factors mean that it's unlikely you'll reclaim your pre-baby body right away—and it's likely that it won't ever look *exactly* the same as before. (Can we just remind you again that you successfully grew and birthed a human? Congratulations! You should reward yourself with a little patience.) Except in rare cases of exceptional genes (or a talented trainer), it's likely you'll need to get acquainted with your post-pregnancy pooch.



Here's what you can expect:

ABS ARE NOT MADE OF STEEL

As we learned earlier, it's common for your abdominal muscles to separate as your baby grows in utero. While unpleasant, this occurrence is considered normal and is often improved post-pregnancy through careful exercise. However, this takes time—and for some women, requires a little extra work.

This condition, known as **diastasis recti**, can make exercising, stretching, and lifting uncomfortable or even downright painful for some women. It can also lead to feelings of frustration over the post-baby bump that just won't budge—many moms report that they still look pregnant though they delivered their baby months or even years before.

YOUR SKIN LOST ITS OOMPH

The human body is pretty incredible in its resilience and ability to heal, but it does have limits. **The elasticity of your skin is finite—and it can be pushed past its breaking point.** For many women, that happens when the abdomen rapidly expands over the course of pregnancy.

While coconut oil or specialty moisturizers can help your skin feel more supple, there's not a ton you can do to prevent the inevitable loss of tone. When you've gone back down to your pre-baby weight, **sometimes your skin simply can't "tighten up" on its own—and you're left with a droopy "pouch" on your lower tummy.** Unfortunately, this droopy, excess skin isn't going to budge, no matter how many sit-ups you do or the amount of firming cream you apply.



A woman displaying stretch marks after pregnancy

Do I have diastasis recti?!

While your doctor is the best person to diagnose the condition, there is a simple exercise you can do at home to figure out if you have diastasis recti.

1. Lie on your back on a solid surface, such as the floor or a firm bed.
2. Bend your knees, placing your feet flat on the floor.
3. Place your open palm over the middle of your belly with fingers pointing toward your toes.
4. Gently but firmly press your fingers into the area of your belly button.
5. While pressing, slowly lift your head, bringing your chin to your chest.



This process prompts your ab muscles to contract. As you feel this happening, notice the space between the muscles on either side of your belly button. If your abdominal muscles are not separated, you will feel only a small space between the muscles. If you feel at least two finger widths of a gap, you have diastasis recti—and if your gap is as wide as four or more of your fingers, you have a severe case. You can repeat the steps above and below your belly button to see how wide the separation is along the abdominal wall.

In cases of severe separation, it's important to speak with a medical professional about ways to improve your comfort and lessen other symptoms, such as incontinence, constipation, and pain during intercourse.

A Brief History of Shapewear

Like how all tissues are “Kleenex” or sodas are “Coke,” Spanx is the face of modern shapewear. These stretchy undergarments are a staple in many a wardrobe, helping everything stay in its place and create a smooth shape under little black dresses. Founded in 2000, Spanx may be one of the most popular and recognizable brands in modern shapewear, but people have been designing garments to hide bulges, smooth dimples, and shape the contours of the body thousands of years.

In **ancient Greece**, girdles fashioned out of soft leather or woven linen were fastened at the waist to support the body, while “Mastoeides” were used to push the breasts out above clothing.

In **Rome** during the same time period, fine leather girdles were worn over clothing as a decorative embellishment rather than supportive undergarment. Some ancient societies believed these belt-like girdles were magical symbols of fertility and virginity that also helped protect women and strengthen men.

Fast forward to the **16th century Elizabethan era**, when corsets started gaining popularity in England and Europe. Catherine de Medici, queen of France and wife of King Henry II, is credited with prompting the widespread adoption of corsets after her ban of thicker waists at court. These devices helped flatten the torso and breasts, creating a stark contrast between the straight upper body and wide lower body emphasized by hooped petticoats.



A woman is turning a wheel which is tightening the string around a young girl's waist in order to make it smaller.

Victorians continued to favor the nipped in waist that could only be achieved by a tightly cinched corset. Corsets were commonly designed with silk fabrics and whale boning or steel—and they were notoriously uncomfortable and even dangerous, leading to broken ribs and difficulties breathing.

As a thinner, flatter aesthetic replaced extreme curves in the early 20th century, corsets and other shapewear fell out of favor and were replaced by garments meant to bind and camouflage. Lightweight camisoles, teddies, and restrictive bras were used to hide breasts and de-emphasize natural curves throughout the 20s.

Hourglass curves started returning to fashion starting in the 30s, and girdles were once again a favorite for highlighting a smooth, shapely torso with elastic materials and strategically placed panels—similar to Spanx, in fact! Girdles continued cinching waists up through the 70s, often combined with bullet bras.

Today's shapewear is made for appearance, function, and comfort. Modern materials, like spandex, are infinitely more durable and forgiving while effectively supporting the body. Gone are the days of your undergarments literally taking your breath away!



A modern example of shapewear by Spanx

The Boobie Blues

Whether you loved the new breast fullness you experienced during pregnancy and breastfeeding or couldn't wait to have your old twins back, size wasn't the only change your breasts may have experienced—and it's likely that things will be looking a bit different long after baby comes.

“Just be kind to yourself. Everyone is different.

Everyone's body is different, everyone's birth experience is different.”

—Liv Tyler

Stretch marks are nearly impossible to avoid—even if you smothered your skin in cocoa butter for the entirety of your pregnancy—and it's normal for them to appear on the breasts in addition to the abdomen. Whether or not you're susceptible to stretch marks has a lot to do with your genes, making them largely out of your control. Plus, it's estimated that upwards of 90% of women have them. Think of them as badges of honor and remember they are a very normal reaction to the changes your body just went through.

While your breasts may have returned to their pre-pregnancy size, that temporary growth sometimes has a lasting impact—namely, **loss of fullness in the upper pole of the breast and a more sloped appearance**. There are a few factors that determine whether or not you will experience breast sagging after pregnancy, including heredity, how much your breasts grew (and how quickly), your pre-partum breast size, and the quality of your skin elasticity. After you finish breastfeeding, your breasts may perk up slightly as your skin starts to bounce back and fat returns to the breasts. You may see gradual improvement for up to six months post-weaning, but it won't completely “undo” breast skin laxity.

Your **nipples may be darker, larger, and pointing south**. While the color and size of your nipples and areolas are likely to return to something close to their original state over time, don't be surprised if they look a bit different.

Persistent pudge

Growing another human in your body for 9 months is no easy feat—and it's completely normal for a little extra cushioning to hang around after you give birth. But even when you've returned to a weight you're comfortable with, you may have a few new bulges that simply will not budge, no matter how often you hit the gym or pass on dessert.

So, what gives? First, you need a **little lesson on fat**:

- ▶ As you move through adolescence, your body increases its production of fat cells before stabilizing when you become an adult.
- ▶ While it's true that your diet and exercise routine aren't actively killing off the fat cells you have (they just shrink), fat cells are not stagnant throughout your life.
- ▶ When you gain weight, fat cells expand and new fat cells are created. When you lose weight, these existing fat cells contract but still exist. In fact, when a fat cell dies a natural death, your body is there to create a new one in its place (thanks!).

Now that the basics are out of the way, it should start making sense why it can be so difficult to shed weight gained during pregnancy. As you put on weight during pregnancy, your body is creating new fat cells that didn't exist before—and they stick around, typically in the abdominal region. That means that **it's not only trickier to slim down, keeping weight off long-term may also be more of a challenge**.



Why do we love telling moms what to do?

In addition to body changes, new responsibilities, and a shifting schedule, new moms have yet another thing to get used to: unsolicited advice and opinions. Whether it's breastfeeding vs formula, what types of snacks you take to the park, or how much screen time you allow your kids, chances are those around you have a strong opinion—and, unfortunately, they often aren't shy about sharing it.

Did you know that almost **two-thirds of moms report that they've been shamed for their parenting choices?**

At least 12% of that criticism is coming from strangers they've encountered in public and 7% from internet commenters. That means that not only are random people telling you what they think you should do, but a large number of your friends and family also have no qualms about verbally questioning your parenting.

“I never understand why mothers judge other mothers, like, ‘What do you mean you didn't breastfeed? What do you mean you didn't do this?’ It's like, ‘Can't we all just be on each other's side?’”

—Gwyneth Paltrow

Unfortunately, women's bodies have also been considered free game for judgment—and the masses rarely miss an opportunity to comment on the size, shape, color, level of fitness, perceived health, or what garments are covering those bodies.



Even when it comes to very personal post-childbearing choices such as plastic surgery, celebrities aren't the only ones receiving judgment. Moms are expected to look fresh-faced and slim just weeks after giving birth, but should they choose to have an aesthetic procedure, they often worry they will be considered vain. The truth is, that's no one's business but your own.

We say it is entirely possible to honor and respect that your body has just created a life while also wishing your pregnancy pouch would go away or your breasts looked different—and there is zero shame in using modern medicine to help you feel comfortable and confident.

Just as a mother should never feel pressured to look a certain way, moms who do choose to change their bodies should not be judged for it. Ultimately, the decision is yours and yours alone.

“As a child, I never heard one woman say to me, ‘I love my body.’ Not my mother, my elder sister, my best friend. No one woman has ever said to me, ‘I am so proud of my body.’ So I make sure to say it to my daughter, because a positive physical outlook has to start at an early age.”

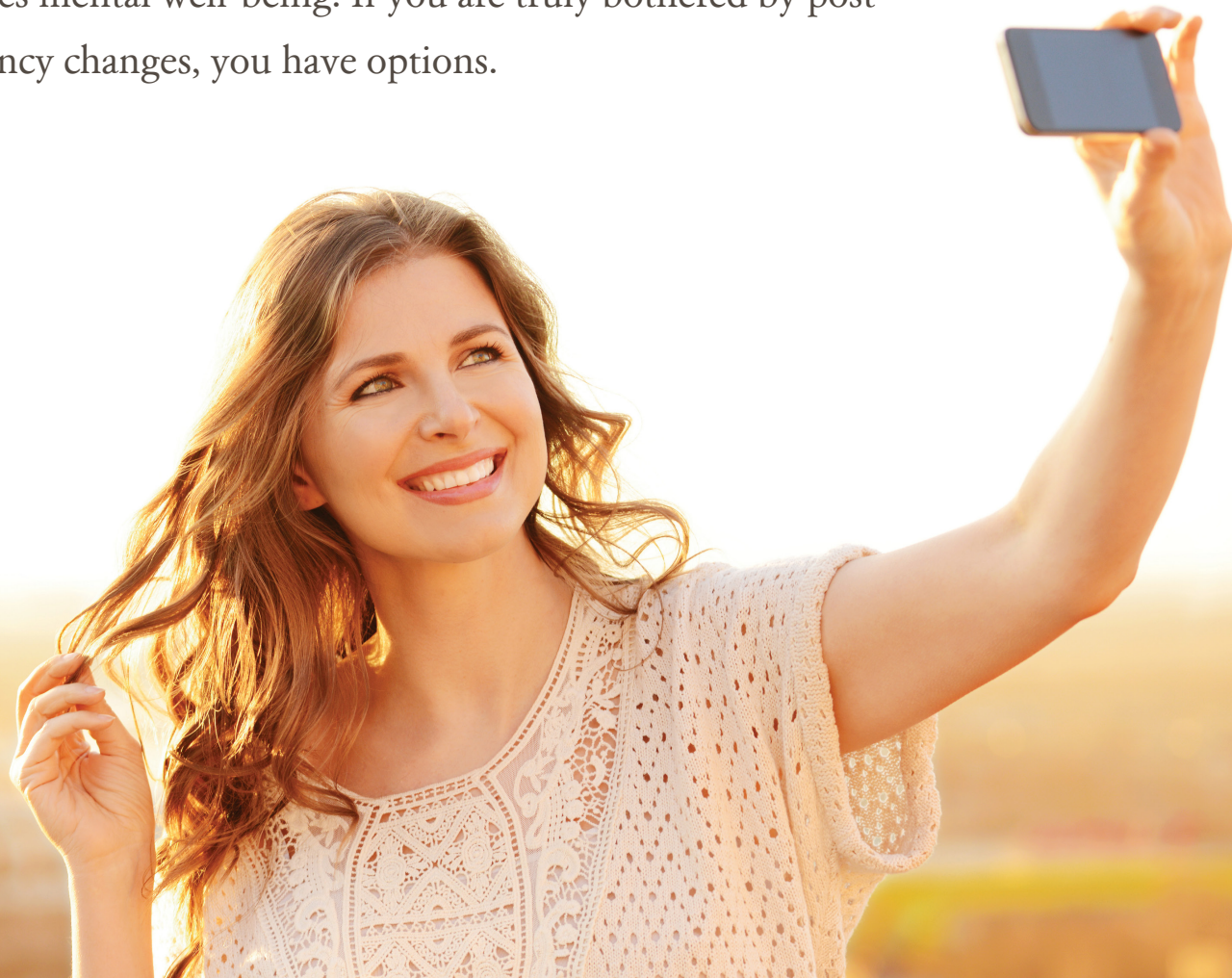
—Kate Winslet

Becoming a mom is a huge, rewarding part of life, but a person's sense of identity need never be tied to just one thing. All moms deserve to feel comfortable in their own skin. Maybe one day you feel beautiful and sexy and the next day you feel like a slob—but you can choose to embrace yourself for what you are today and what you contribute to the world, regardless of what others think. That's the kind of confidence you want to pass on to your kids.



Options for Getting Your Groove Back

Feeling great about yourself is important—healthy self-confidence increases mental well-being. If you are truly bothered by post-pregnancy changes, you have options.



Your first line of defense

When your body has fully healed and you feel personally ready to begin reclaiming your body, you may find that things aren't quite as easy or quick to bounce back as they once might have been. Know that it's going to be a journey...and any journey starts with just a few simple steps forward.

“To expect someone to look like her pre-baby self immediately is odd. Because you just grew a human and then birthed that human—there’s a lot that needs to go back to where it was. All your organs move around, for chrissakes.”

—Zoey Deschanel

For many moms, nutritionists, personal trainers, surgical procedures and skin treatments are cost-prohibitive or simply not an option. That immediately takes you out of the running for an apples-to-apples comparison with your favorite Instagrammer or celebrity who looks perfect a month after giving birth. Now that that's out of the way, let's focus on a few simple ways that you can start addressing your concerns in a healthy way.

ADJUSTING YOUR EATING HABITS

It can be difficult to manage cravings or a larger appetite after baby comes—and healthy food habits may take a backseat as you're battling sleep deprivation, constant baby feedings, and postpartum hormones. We're going to sound a little repetitive here, but be patient with yourself. If you need to cram some Doritos in your mouth between errands or a milkshake is the only thing you want during a particularly stressful moment, know that it's okay and won't undo your progress entirely.



Focus your energy instead on the positive; namely, *adding* good foods to your diet. Eating more vegetables and other healthy foods can be nearly painless if you start with simple swaps. Here are some easy examples:

- ▶ Choosing the Caesar salad over Buffalo wings for an appetizer
- ▶ Serving a [healthy spinach dip](#) with carrot sticks for dipping can sub for the usual queso & chips you might serve visiting friends
- ▶ Making uber-easy [roasted veggies](#) instead of mashed potatoes for a side dish
- ▶ Choosing a veggie-packed stir fry over a deep-fried meat or noodle dish at Asian restaurants
- ▶ Having [fruit for dessert](#) instead of cake or cookies

Whole foods like this will help you feel more full and energized without packing in empty calories. Because your routine is going to be a bit unpredictable with a new child, also keep a water bottle and wholesome snacks available throughout your day so you have something healthy to sip and eat (and can avoid the temptation of fast food) when hunger strikes.

If a nutritionist isn't in your budget, consider exploring pregnancy forums for tips, signing up for cost-effective virtual nutrition counseling, or ask your OB GYN or general practitioner for some guidance in making smart eating decisions.

TIGHTENING UP THE MUMMY TUMMY

If you took our diastasis recti test and have found that you have abdominal muscle separation, it's important to take it slow and work out your core in the right ways—don't indiscriminately take on your fave celeb's brutal abdominal workout.



Diastasis recti can be quite uncomfortable, but mild-to-moderate cases are often treatable through exercise. In fact, there are a few exercise protocols specifically designed to reduce muscle separation, increase comfort, and help flatten the pregnancy pouch. Leah Keller's "Dia Method" was [recently featured by NPR](#) for its ability to safely help women with diastasis recti.

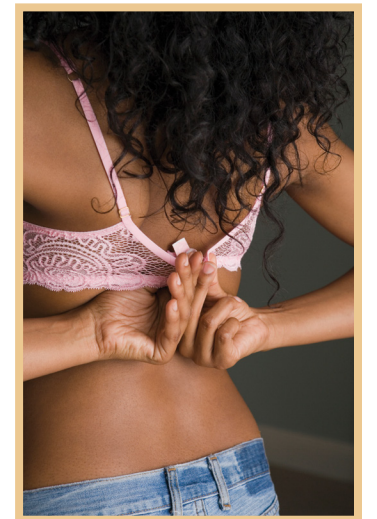
If you want more direction, your local gym may have a trainer on staff who can help ensure you're tackling your post-childbirth workout in a safe and productive way.

ADJUSTING TO BREAST CHANGES

You may find that your breasts are the least likely to show improvement with exercise or dieting. While you can work out your chest muscles and focus on improving your posture to help your chest appearance, there's not much you can do about breast sagging or loss of fullness. You do have control over your personal style and comfort, however.

Once you've finished breastfeeding and can pack away your nursing bra and lactation pads, treat yourself to some new undergarments. Forcing yourself into old bra that may not fit right anymore or is no longer flattering will only lead to physical and emotional discomfort. Better yet, set up a bra sizing session at a local store to get some guidance on sizing and styles.

Consider updating your wardrobe as well—giving away clothes that no longer flatter your body can help you avoid wishing you had your old body back every time you look in the closet. [Being a new mom can be an opportunity for developing an updated "uniform"](#) that makes you feel put together without [having to invest thought into it daily](#). Even moms on a tight budget can cruise thrift and consignment stores for simple pieces that flatter their current shape and fit a busy lifestyle.



The 411 on Body Positivity, Neutrality, & Owning *However* You Feel About You

The body positivity movement has been gaining traction, and people everywhere are celebrating a cultural shift toward more acceptance and inclusivity of bodies of all shapes and sizes. While this move toward greater universal self-confidence can be incredibly empowering, it is not without its flaws. A quick Google search turns up articles like, “[Stop Telling Me to Love My Body](#)” or “[What If Body Acceptance Doesn’t Work?](#)”, which explore some of the challenges of expecting everyone to practice radical self-love—and the psychological damage it can do if you just aren’t feelin’ yourself some days when the world is telling you that you should.

“I think it’s time that we, as a movement, stop pushing people to love their bodies completely before they’ve even had a chance to apologize and make friends with them.”

—Ravishly

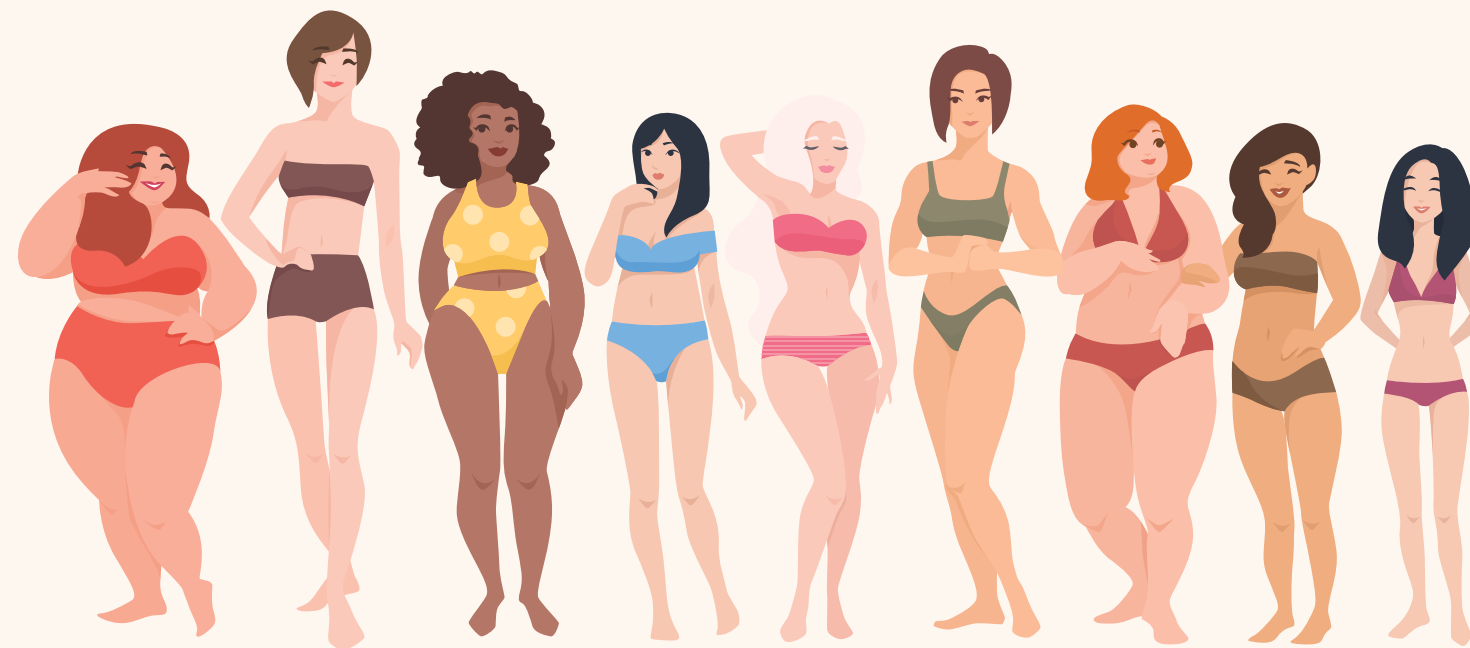
The fact is, even the most outwardly confident of us have those days. You know the ones: your hair refuses to lay right, your clothes feel claustrophobic and unflattering, or a monster pimple decides to pop up. And while we’d love to be able to own those days, to sashay out the door and tackle the world like Beyoncé, *it’s okay if you can’t*.

Body neutrality is being okay with the fact that you’re still a little uncomfortable with the jiggle of your tummy and can’t bring yourself to sport a midriff top. Or accepting that while you’re not going to rock an itty bitty bikini at the beach, you have a pretty okay relationship with the way your breasts look. Body neutrality is the perfectly acceptable middle line between the high-pressure goal of loving your body no matter what and allowing your dislike of perceived flaws to impact your entire life—a gray area wherein most of us exist day to day.

*“After making two babies, holy cow, does your body do some crazy stuff! It’s hard to stay positive and love yourself. You feel like a kangaroo with a giant pouch; everything’s saggy and weird. But you think about how beautiful it is that you’re able to make children. When I lose sight of that, I exercise, read Dr. Seuss’s *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!*, and spend time with my kids.”*

—Drew Barrymore

Exploring the pros and cons of body positivity is particularly important when it comes to new moms who are learning to exist in a body that can feel alien to them. We applaud those who shuck their discomfort and proudly accept body changes as they come, but those who haven’t gotten there yet should never be made to feel less than if they can’t do the same.



Minimally invasive medical solutions for common issues

From urinary stress incontinence to fat reduction, chances are you can find a non-surgical treatment to help improve many concerns without having to take more drastic measures. Even better, many moms find these solutions surprisingly accessible thanks to fairly reasonable price tags and lack of costly downtime.

FIGHT BACK ON HORMONAL SKIN CHANGES

It can be difficult to manage cravings or a larger appetite after baby comes—and healthy food habits may take a backseat as you're battling sleep deprivation, constant baby feedings, and postpartum hormones. We're going to sound a little repetitive here, but be patient with yourself. If you need to cram some Doritos in your mouth between errands or a milkshake is the only thing you want during a particularly stressful moment, know that it's okay and won't undo your progress entirely.

Your hormones will continue their rollercoaster ride for a bit after you've given birth—and while things will eventually calm down, you may notice some lasting changes. Combined with the fact that caring for baby often leaves moms with little time for taking care of themselves or following a multi-step skincare routine, you have a perfect recipe for troubled skin.

Now that you're no longer growing a little human, you have a nearly endless list of medical-grade products and treatments available to you.

Improve dark patches. While chloasma—the [dark brown patches](#) we discussed earlier in the guide—typically fades within a few months after giving birth, sometimes the discoloration sticks around. Those who are genetically predisposed to hyperpigmentation are particularly likely to earn a few seemingly permanent dark spots. Luckily, there are a handful of treatments that can safely lighten hyperpigmentation

- ▶ Skin resurfacing with state-of-the-art cosmetic lasers can help lighten dark patches and improve a number of concerns. Laser treatments do require a bit of downtime, in the sense that the subsequent peeling may have you housebound for a few days. Luckily, the newest generation of lasers, including the [Halo hybrid fractional laser](#), are designed to provide optimal results with less downtime.
- ▶ If laser skin resurfacing is out of your budget or you'd prefer something a bit less invasive, a [chemical peel](#) can also help lessen the appearance of hyperpigmentation. You may need a few sessions to see the results you want, and you'll still experience peeling, but your provider can recommend the best type of peel for your circumstances.
- ▶ For more moderate hyperpigmentation, the [Rezenerate facial](#) can help rejuvenate the skin—and it's soothing, to boot! In addition to lightening dark patches, this facial also softens skin, supports your body's production of collagen, and even reduces fine lines.

Reduce acne inflammation. Hormones aren't the only thing wreaking havoc on your skin—the stress of being a parent, sleep deprivation, and lack of time to make sure you're eating right and taking care of your face can all lead to breakouts.

If your normal routine simply isn't cutting it, and you're tired of battling blemishes, a [professional acne treatment protocol](#) and [medical-grade, at-home skincare products](#) can make a huge difference. Working with a medical professional gives you access to pharmaceutical grade ingredients that have been proven to be safe and effective.



Give dull, dry skin a boost. Being a mom can be *hard*—and some days, remembering to wear matching shoes is a tall order. An unfortunate side effect of wrangling children all day is lack of time to take care of your skin.

To give your skin some much needed TLC, reach out to your licensed aesthetician and ask about what **specialty facial treatments** can help. (Hint: the **HydraFacial®** is a favorite for both expecting and new moms alike since it uses the power of water and ultra-soothing serums to cleanse and brighten). Next, get her expert recommendations for daily products that are easy to use and packed with the right nutrients for your skin type.

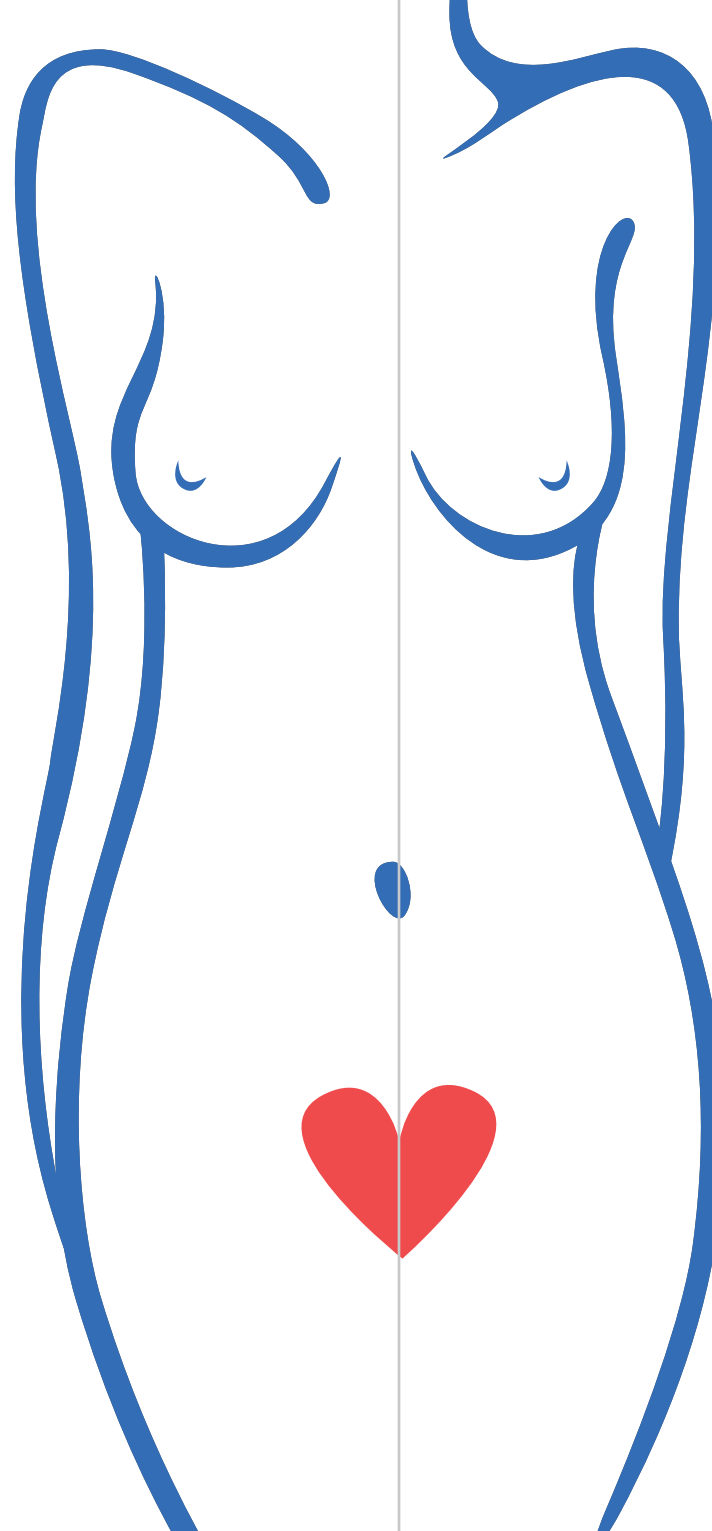
REDUCE STUBBORN POCKETS OF FAT

We've gone over *why* you're likely noticing fat in new areas that just won't go away; now let's talk about what you can do about it. For those who are happy with their overall weight and just want to ditch the small bulges that are rebelling against exercise, **CoolSculpting® non-surgical fat reduction** has become incredibly popular—even among famous moms like supermodel Molly Sims and actress Debra Messing.

“I like myself. I like my body. It's just a slightly better version.

—Debra Messing

Here's the 411. CoolSculpting uses a proprietary cooling technology to rapidly cool fat cells to the point where they break down, without impacting your skin or surrounding tissues. Over the course of a few months, your body then naturally metabolizes those dead fat cells—and you get to enjoy seeing the treated area slim down. There's no anesthesia required, treatment is fairly comfortable, and you can get back to your day-to-day life right away. You may need a few treatment cycles to get the results you hope for.



LESSEN THE APPEARANCE OF CELLULITE

Whether you were always prone to cellulite or the tell-tale dimples showed up for the first time after becoming a mom, cellulite on the legs and buttocks is a common complaint—and the weight fluctuations of pregnancy can amplify the issue.

Despite what the bottles say, there are no creams or miracle elixirs that can improve the appearance of cellulite because it's a symptom of something happening *under* your skin—and it affects a huge percentage of the female population. But while common, if it's bothering you or keeping you from feeling comfortable in shorts or a swimsuit, there's nothing wrong with exploring ways to improve the condition.

Cellulite is notoriously difficult to treat, but there have been advancements in minimally invasive technology for long-term improvements. **Cellfina®** is a perfect example of those advancements—and a quick, relatively comfortable treatment can reduce the appearance of cellulite for at least three years.

IMPROVE VAGINAL LAXITY & REDUCE STRESS INCONTINENCE

Leaking urine when you sneeze or have a particularly intense workout can be embarrassing and uncomfortable. Unfortunately, difficulty controlling your bladder is a common occurrence after pregnancy—and sometimes kegels or other strengthening interventions simply don't work. As an added frustration, the same weakened vaginal muscles that can lead to stress incontinence can also impact your ability to have a fulfilling sex life with your partner.

Over the past few years, non-surgical vaginal rejuvenation treatments have become an increasingly popular way to improve bladder control with minimal downtime. Designed to improve the function, sensation, and appearance of the vagina and external tissues, these

treatments tighten treated areas through controlled thermal energy—typically delivered via [radiofrequency](#) or [CO2 laser technology](#). As strength returns to the vaginal muscles and tissues, they are able to better support the bladder. Patients typically report reduced issues with incontinence, increased natural lubrication, and improved sensation.

Is a mommy makeover right for me?

“[Mommy makeover](#)” is a catch-all term typically used to describe a set of surgical procedures designed to address common changes in the breasts and body after pregnancy and childbirth. For moms who simply do not feel like themselves anymore, are unhappy with the way their bodies look and feel, or who are in discomfort because of body changes, cosmetic surgery can make a life-changing impact.

Surgery is not right for everyone or a decision that should be made lightly. But moms who do choose to correct body concerns that impact their quality of life don't have to answer to anyone else about their motivations.

The most common combination of procedures in a mommy makeover address the three areas of concern typical to many moms: the breasts, abdomen, and stubborn fat.

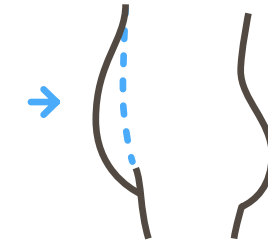
[BREAST LIFT](#): Reduces sagging and improves fullness



Depending on how large your breasts were pre-baby, how much they grew while you were expecting, the elasticity of your skin, and your genetic makeup, your breasts may look somewhat deflated after pregnancy and breastfeeding. With the right combination of factors (and multiple pregnancies), some women experience extreme breast sagging that can be exceedingly uncomfortable.

A breast lift helps restore a more youthful look by reducing excess skin, raising the breast mound higher on the chest, and repositioning the nipple and areola. Because breast lift surgery doesn't alter the size of the breasts or restore lost fullness, many moms opt to also have [breast implants](#) placed in conjunction with a lifting procedure. Even a small implant can make a large difference by adding volume and shape back to the upper breast.

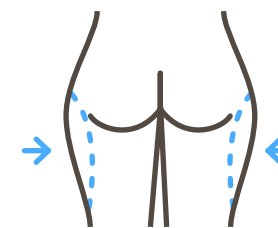
[ABDOMINOPLASTY \(TUMMY TUCK\)](#): Remove excess skin and correct separation of abdominal muscles



The post-pregnancy body change that perhaps bothers mothers most is sagging in the lower abdomen. This is especially true when there is extreme skin laxity or severe muscle separation that goes beyond what special exercises or non-surgical interventions can repair. In these cases, tummy tuck surgery can both improve the appearance of the stomach and fix separated muscles for increased comfort.

During surgery, excess, sagging skin is removed and remaining skin is pulled taut, restoring a flat appearance to the tummy and reducing stretch marks. There's just one caveat: recovery after tummy tuck surgery requires plenty of rest and strict avoidance of most physical activities for a few weeks, so it's often easiest to wait until your children are at least a few years old.

[LIPOSUCTION](#): Eliminates stubborn fat that's resistant to diet and exercise



It's the most popular procedure in the country, for good reasons—and it's a great option for spots that aren't appropriate for non-surgical fat reduction or to enhance the results of a tummy tuck.

Liposuction can reduce excess fat virtually anywhere on the body, helping to sculpt better contours and slim areas that aren't responding to other interventions. Surgeons only need to make a very small incision for the procedure, and recovery is often easier than many assume. Treated areas will be sore, bruised, and swollen, but many moms are able to return to work or daily routines within about a week.

OTHER PROCEDURES: Enhance results or address additional concerns

A mommy makeover can be completely customized to each patient to address their unique needs. In fact, many moms like to include medical skincare treatments and even anti-aging solutions in their mommy makeover. During your consultation, you and your surgeon can discuss your concerns and explore the best treatment options for you.

No matter what procedures you consider, it's important that you **work with a reputable, qualified plastic surgeon who will perform your procedures in a safe, accredited facility.** Make sure he or she is [board certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery](#), has experience with your procedures of interest, and works with a team of trained nurses, OR staff, and anesthesiologists.



Doc Talk

“I find the majority of mothers choosing surgery have weighed their options, fully considered the process, and finally come to the conclusion that it is something they want to do for themselves. There is zero shame in seeking an experienced, board certified plastic surgeon to help you feel more confident.”

Dr. Paul M. Parker, Medical Director of the Parker Center for Plastic Surgery

How do I tell my kids I had plastic surgery?

Depending on the age of your children when you choose to have a procedure, they may require a little context around why mommy has bandages or isn't able to play with them quite so enthusiastically. Ultimately, what you choose to tell your kids, when you divulge the information (if at all), and how you approach the subject is entirely up to you.

If you do decide you want to tell your kids, take some time to examine your personal motivations for having surgery. How has your experience improved your life? How do you now feel about yourself? Consider the positive aspects and use that to frame the conversation.



Talk about the physical effects of surgery and recovery. While it's important to only discuss what you feel comfortable divulging, honesty is critical—your child will know something is different, so helping them understand that you are safe and going to be okay will prevent them from experiencing unnecessary stress during your recovery. Prepare them for what to expect and let them know that while you may not be able to pick them up, it's a temporary situation and you will be saving up all your cuddles for when your body feels better. Older children may benefit from feeling useful during your recovery, so have them help out around the house.

Don't ignore the emotional motivators for and impact of surgery. Remember, body positivity and plastic surgery aren't mutually exclusive—and your decision to have a procedure doesn't have to impact your son or daughter's self-esteem or view of their own bodies. When discussing your mommy makeover, talk about how your body changed for childbearing. Explain that you took a lot of time to consider your options and met with

doctors; don't make light of the experience. Be cautious with younger kids, who may inadvertently take this to mean that they "broke" your body when they were born. Focus instead on the restorative aspect of your procedure and how much better you feel now thanks to having help from your doctor.

Let them ask questions. And be prepared to field some tough ones. Older kids and teenagers may be curious about your overall views on confidence, beauty standards, and whether or not surgery is always the right answer. Chances are, you won't know the answers to some of the questions—and that's okay. Just try not to shut down any questions or fall back on "do as I say, not as I do" responses.



Remember: You're doing just fine, mama!

Whether you have one kid or 5, had a fully natural birth or screamed for drugs during delivery, are happy to flaunt a mummy tummy on the beach or needed a little outside help to start feeling more like yourself after having a child...you are one incredible mama!

"No one's really doing it perfectly, I just think you love your kids with your whole heart, and you do the best you possibly can."

—Reese Witherspoon

If you take anything away from this guide, we hope it's the understanding that you have gone through a amazing, mystifying, and damn hard experience bringing new life into the world—and you should celebrate yourself and other moms like you.



About Dr. Paul M. Parker

Paul M. Parker, MD is the Medical Director of the Parker Center in Paramus, New Jersey. He has over 25 years of surgical experience and is renowned for his quality surgical results and his unwavering commitment to patient satisfaction. Dr. Parker has been selected as one of the top surgeons in his field by Consumer's Research Council of America and has been named in Castle Connolly's registry of "America's Cosmetic Doctors." He also received the Patients' Choice Award, an honor given to physicians who have received near perfect scores as voted by their patients. Dr. Parker served as Assistant Clinical Professor of Plastic Surgery at New York University Medical Center.



Dr. Parker and his highly educated and caring staff are dedicated to providing their patients with the highest quality plastic surgery experience possible. Dr. Parker's three-pronged practice philosophy is thorough patient education, maximum safety, and superior patient care. His team of dedicated professionals endeavors everyday to make this philosophy a reality. This integrated team approach is pervasive throughout the Parker Center and involves the entire staff from the front desk and medical team to the aestheticians and massage therapists. Dr. Parker's patients repeatedly say how pleased they are with their surgical results and treatment given by this group of highly trained individuals who truly care about their well-being.



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