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Why the Pregnancy Glow Is a Myth We Should Stop Perpetuating

...And what to do when your skin decides to rebel while you're expecting

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There are a lot of old wives' tales associated with pregnancy, like that heartburn leads to hairy babies. Or that you can predict a baby's gender by your cravings. And then there's the so-called pregnancy glow, which is the notion that pregnant women are magically #blessed with the most radiant skin of their lives.

Well, it appears as though the stork passed me over for the latter rumored pregnancy perk because getting knocked up has led to some of the worst acne I've ever had. Of course, my pregnancy hasn't been entirely without benefits, with the obvious being the prospect of a chubby-cheeked baby at the end (which, trust me, in spite of the gripes I'm about to air, I don't take for granted). Almost as sweet, pregnancy finally gave me the voluptuous figure my seventh-grade self had desperately hoped for in a very "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret" kind of way. Unfortunately, in the process, my skin has also reverted to my teen years.

Almost as soon as that second line appeared on my pregnancy test, gigantic cystic acne sprouted on my back, stubborn pimples dotted my jawline and zits appeared where they never had before (apparently shoulder acne is a thing, who knew?). It was painful and embarrassing. To add insult to injury, because I was still trying to keep my bun-in-the-oven under wraps, I couldn't even explain away my acne-riddled complexion. At one particularly low point I had to enlist my husband to color-correct and conceal each body pustule so that I could attend a fancy Beverly Hills party in a dress that exposed my upper back.

Needless to say, I've come to resent the idea of the pregnancy glow. I mean, I'm literally growing another human being *inside my body* -- and I'm supposed to *glow* while doing it? And I'm supposed to adopt this glow at the same time my pants don't fit, Kleenex commercials bring me to tears and the smell of Cheerios makes me want to gag? Give me a break.

But despite my exasperation with my skin's rebellion, the health journalist in me was intrigued. Was there any truth to this mythical glow? Was it just a lie concocted by the patriarchy? Or was it just something we projected on moms-to-be? More importantly, where was mine?

To get to the bottom of the so-called "pregnancy glow," I consulted skin care and pregnancy experts. Read on to find out what it is, how it can go oh-so wrong and what you can do to cope with unwanted baby-induced breakouts.

The Truth About the Pregnancy Glow

Turns out, the pregnancy glow might not technically be quite as big of a myth as some other old wives' tales. It comes in part from your boosted blood flow -- your body may be pumping as much as 50 percent more blood during pregnancy. "You literally have more blood volume during pregnancy. Your vessels dilate to make sure your fetus gets enough oxygen," says **Ava Shamban**, MD, a Los Angeles-based dermatologist and author of "Heal Your Skin." "Along with the blood flow, you get more nutrients and increased cell turnover. Everything is happier."

Hormones are also at play here, according to Dr. Scott Sullivan, MD, Director of Maternal-Fetal Medicine at the Medical University of South Carolina. "Your hormone levels go up really, really high. It's dramatic over the first 12 weeks and it fluctuates. It affects almost every organ system," he says. The increase of androgens in particular -- a class of testosterone hormones coming from the placenta and ovaries -- may increase the amount of oil, or sebum, produced by your glands. For some women, this extra oil production may result in that dewy, effervescent glow. But in others, like myself, it can wreak absolute havoc on the skin.



Knocking Out Acne While Knocked Up

I've always been an avid Googler, and my number of search queries has grown exponentially with each week of pregnancy. In the beginning, they all went something like this: "Is [fill in food, chemical or activity] safe for pregnancy?" This was no exception in my quest to treat my pregnancy acne. As a beauty editor I have literally dozens of skin care products at my disposal, and yet, I worried that I might be clearing my skin at the expense of the little dude residing in my uterus.

Though many of my pregnancy anxieties have been overblown, it turns out that a little bit of apprehension around what I was putting on my face was warranted.

"There have been no specific studies done on pregnant women and how much absorption [of topical skin care products] is seen through the skin into the bloodstream. All the recommendations are based on animal studies," explains Maryland-based dermatologist Elizabeth Tanzi, MD. "In general, we recommend being very cautious with skin care products during pregnancy because we just don't have a lot of hard, scientific facts, and it's better to be ultra-cautious."

Sullivan estimates that the absorption rate of most topical products is about 5 percent. "With that in mind, we strongly discourage the use of any retinoids, which unfortunately are really effective. Any absorption of those is thought to have a risk of birth defects."

Fortunately, you have other options. "Pregnant women can use glycolic acid-containing cleansers to help remove excess oil," suggests Tanzi. Shamban seconds this recommendation. "And treat it preventatively. Don't stop when the acne goes away," she adds. (When it comes to glycolic acid cleansers, I've had luck with Ole Henriksen Find Your Balance Oil Control Cleanser, \$25, and I also like the incredibly gentle BeautyRx by Dr. Schultz Balancing Glycolic Cleanser, \$25. Or try one of these hardworking glycolic acid products.)



Many experts agree that you can use acne-fighting standby salicylic acid without fear. However, I got mixed answers about benzoyl peroxide. Though Sullivan and my personal doctor say it's fine to use, both Tanzi and Shamban cautioned against it. Your best bet would be to hear out your own doctor.

Of course, you could forgo topical solutions altogether. "If breakouts are still a problem, gentle blue light treatments can be done in a dermatologists office that help to reduce acne in a gentle, chemical-free way," Tanzi says.

Removing the Pregnancy Mask

Though sometimes melasma will disappear on its own, it can be a lot trickier to manage than pregnancy acne. "The melanocytes are finicky and deep in the skin. They don't respond as well to topical treatment. There are few ways to reliably treat melasma," Sullivan says.

Moms-to-be should definitely steer clear of products containing hydroquinone, a common brightening agent. While studies haven't found a correlation between hydroquinone and birth defects, research indicates that the body absorbs around 35 to 45 percent of topical hydroquinone, making it much riskier to use than ingredients that are absorbed at a much lower rate.

Your best bet? Focus on preventing melasma by being exceptionally cautious with sun exposure. "Wear a heavy sunscreen -- the kind that makes your face white -- when you're outdoors," Shamban says. (Though it won't make your face white, I like Isdin Eryfotona Actinica Ultralight Emulsion SPF 50+, \$50, for its high SPF and lightweight mineral formula, but here are a bunch of other great mineral sunscreen options).



And think beyond the beauty counter. "The best defense for hyperpigmentation during pregnancy is a hat because even sunscreen will allow melasma to develop," Tanzi adds. "Always wear a hat when in the sun during pregnancy." (We're a fan of these stylish sun hats.)

Additionally, glycolic acid may further cement itself as your skin's new BFF, as it's another safe way to help even out your skin tone during pregnancy. After you've made it through your pregnancy, Sullivan says you can consider more aggressive treatments, like chemical peels and lasers -- one of which I hope to have time to book somewhere between picking out a daycare and sending the little one off to college.

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