

Tummy trouble?

Exercise, acceptance, and even surgery...
Three mums tell all about learning
to love their post-baby bodies

Let's face it – we'd take any number of stretchmarks if it meant a happy, healthy baby. But many women feel pressure to get back into their pre-pregnancy clothes, or are self-conscious about changes to their tummy, from loose skin to split abdominal muscles. We spoke to three mums on how they felt about their post-pregnancy tums and got expert advice on how to care for your belly.

How can pregnancy affect your stomach?

❖ **STRETCHMARKS** Narrow streaks or lines caused by the skin suddenly stretching affect eight out of ten pregnant women.

Usually red or purple to start with, they gradually fade to a silvery-white colour.

Creams, gels, laser surgery and cosmetic surgery are all available to treat them, with varying results. You can reduce your risk by maintaining a healthy weight during pregnancy and looking after your skin.

❖ **SPLIT ABS** Two-thirds of women experience a separation between their abdominal muscles during pregnancy, due to stretching and hormonal changes. Any separation of three fingers wide or more is termed diastasis rectus, or split abs, and should be assessed by a physio. The condition can affect posture, as well as the appearance of your stomach.

❖ **SAGGY SKIN** As you get older, the elasticity of your skin reduces, while collagen production slows, making it harder for your body to return to its natural shape after birth, especially if your muscles have stretched. Exercise and diet can help, along with some good support underwear, while surgery can be a final resort.

❖ **SCARS** Around one in four babies are delivered by c-section. There are different types of incisions, but the most common one is made along the top of the bikini line and should be around 15cm long. It should fade over time but you can use treatments like Bio-Oil to aid the process.



“Pushing a double buggy did the trick!”

CAROLINE KENNEY, 34, FROM BOURNEMOUTH, IS MUM TO TWINS DEXTER AND LUCAS, 11 MONTHS.

“I've always been a bit of a fitness fanatic – running about 20 miles per week – but when I found out I was pregnant in February 2013, I began to take it easy. It was a hard pregnancy, and I was exhausted a lot of the time. However, despite my inactivity, I managed to keep my weight gain to a minimum. I was lucky enough to have very few cravings – and any I had seemed to be for vegetables or salad, so I was very fortunate. In the end, I only put on two-and-a-half stone, taking my weight to around 11-and-a-half stone at 37 weeks.

Amazingly, I managed to avoid stretchmarks: I think this was mainly due to good genes – neither my mum nor my sister had stretchmarks from their pregnancies. But it could also be due to the fact I used

stretchmark oil on my skin, too.

I had to take it easy after my c-section, which I'd needed to have as one of my boys was breech. So, I started to take the twins for a walk in a double buggy, gradually building the distance up. I now walk about six miles a few times a week. I also breastfed for the first ten weeks, which helped speed up my weight-loss.

I've always eaten very healthily. I tend to eat porridge for breakfast, fish for lunch and chicken with lots of vegetables for my dinner, and snack on dried fruit and nuts.

I'm back down to nine stone and wearing my pre-pregnancy jeans! Now that the boys are sleeping better and getting into a routine, I hope to get my running shoes out again. But I'm happy with my figure, and, more than anything, I just want to enjoy my boys – they won't be small forever, so time is precious.”

“I'm happy with my bigger belly”

MARIA LA CHICA 36, FROM BASINGSTOKE, IS MUM TO TWINS ERIC AND ELISA, 17 MONTHS.

“My weight dropped dramatically after I gave birth to my babies in May 2013 by c-section. I suffered from pre-eclampsia, and, as a result, the twins were delivered slightly early – at 35 weeks and 5 days.

I was left with around 22lb of excess weight, but this disappeared in days. I think the rapid loss was because I was kept in hospital for a week due to complications with my wound and the meals they gave me were tiny! I was also breastfeeding, and producing milk for hungry twins uses a lot of calories.

While lots of people dream of 'snapping back into shape', I was very unhappy when I left hospital. People kept saying I looked tired or gaunt. Although I felt fine, I didn't like knowing I looked too thin, so I actively tried to consume more calories. Perhaps I went too far, as I now have a significant stomach, and have gone from a size 12 before pregnancy to a size 14. However, I'm happy with my weight.

I'm lucky that I don't have loose skin or stretchmarks, so I know I can lose weight in the future if I want. At the moment, the twins are my priority, and my belly is the last thing on my mind.”



“A tummy tuck was my only option”

LEAH WOOD, 27, FROM LEICESTER,
IS A MUM OF FOUR.

“After giving birth four times in six years, between 2007 and 2013, my stomach was almost unrecognisable. I became very big during pregnancy, and suffered muscle separation. The result was an overhanging bulge that no exercise would shift.

I was desperately unhappy with the way I looked – my stomach was probably two dress sizes bigger than the rest of my body. It affected my confidence – I thought I'd never look attractive again.

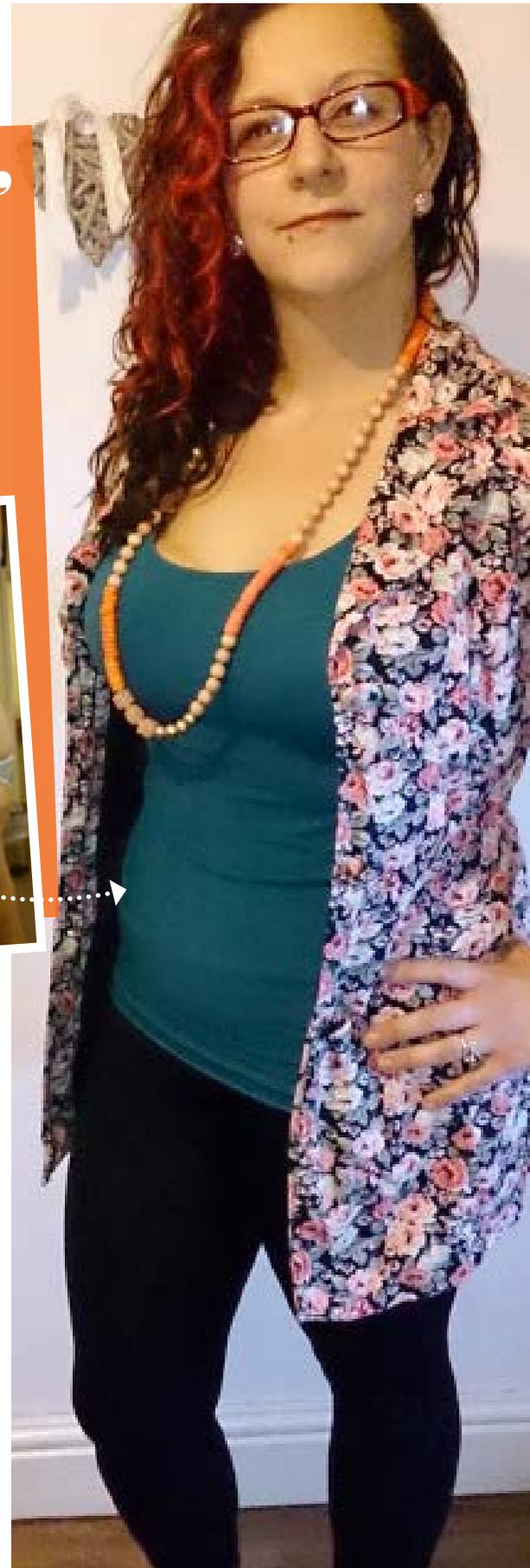
I went to my GP who confirmed that, because of the muscle separation, although physio might help, surgery was my only real option. I couldn't get the £6,000 op on the NHS. Desperate to feel better, I took out a loan to pay for it.

When it came to the operation, I was more worried about the general anaesthetic than the procedure itself. I was concerned that something might go wrong and worried about my children. I also fretted about the recovery. My

husband Gavin took a week off work and my friends and family were on standby.

In the end I only experienced mild pain and bounced back quickly. I was told that this was probably because I had age on my side. However, it wasn't all plain sailing. After the operation, I experienced a small opening in my surgical wound which took about three weeks to heal. I also had terrible swelling. I was devastated by this: surgery wasn't the quick-fix I'd hoped for. In fact, it can take a year to recover.

Despite the complications, I am still pleased I had the tuck. I don't know what I'd have done without it! I'm back to a size ten and, while I still get swelling from time to time, I look so much better and feel confident again.”



FIX YOUR MUM TUM

When it comes to shaping up your stomach after birth, it isn't a case of simply exercising and then you'll tone up. For example, those classic stomach-crunching sit-ups need to be avoided. They put a tremendous amount of pressure on the weakened abdominals and will make any separation worse.

Ante- and postnatal fitness expert Claire Mockridge, who's worked with more than a thousand women in Nottingham (clairemockridge.com), has developed the seven-step BREATHE Plan to help new mums regain their pre-pregnancy figures:

- ❖ **Breathe** Learn to breathe into your ribcage to disperse built-up pressure in the abdomen that's left over from pregnancy.
- ❖ **Re-align posture** Stand and sit correctly, be aware of slouching, sitting for too long or improper technique when you exercise.
- ❖ **Engage your core** Start with low-level postnatal Pilates-based exercises (avoid sit-ups forever!) and engage your core in everything you do, from lifting up your baby, to moving around in bed.
- ❖ **Address your shoulders** It's not all about the abs, spend time stretching your chest and strengthening your upper back too.
- ❖ **Task management** Getting out of bed, stepping down to the floor and lifting/carrying your baby all need to be done differently when you have abdominal separation.
- ❖ **Homework** If you don't do your 'homework' regularly, taking all of the above points into consideration, results will be slower.
- ❖ **Eat right** Pack your body full of lean protein, veg and loads of water.