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The best way to tackle stretch marks

Surgery aside, what's the best way to tackle stretchmarks?

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Julia Roberts: most famous actress on the planet; and now also its most popular inhabitant – at least with other mothers. After being photographed on the beach in Hawaii wearing nothing but a bikini and a wrinkly tummy, her approval rating must surely rival even that of Saint Joanna of Lumley.

What makes Roberts's chutzpah even more exceptional is that, in an industry obsessed with youth and eternal perfection, she is a lone voice of reason. In recent months those of us with less than optimal abdominal arrangements have had to endure a succession of increasingly taut middle-aged bodies disporting themselves in various stages of undress. Madonna, Demi Moore et al: the middle-aged woman with a better body than her teenage daughter is a perversion of our post-surgical times, and Ms Roberts (41) has just put two fingers up to the lot of them.

Roberts looks exactly the way a woman who has had three children – two of them twins – should look. One baby on its own is bad enough when it comes to stretchmarks and jelly belly; two in one go is an absolute nightmare. Much can be done through diet and exercise, and of course genes play a huge part. But ultimately, the stomach of a mother-of-three will never really be able to compete with that of a childless woman half her age – unless, of course, she resorts to surgery.

Such is the nature of the female psyche that it's unlikely Roberts will be thanking the photographer who took that picture. And given her profession, it is almost inevitable that she will come under pressure to have a little "work" done to alleviate the problem.

So, if plastic perfection is not your ultimate goal but you would like to give nature a little leg-up, what are the non-invasive options? The only one I have actually witnessed in action (and therefore feel qualified to recommend) is Velashape (www.velashape.com). It's basically a vigorous heated vacuum massage (described by a friend who had it as "like getting into a bad fight with a Dyson") that sort of shrink-wraps the skin and underlying tissue to make it look smoother and tighter. It works very well on stomachs, but is also suitable for cellulite on the thighs and underarms.

You need four or five sessions to really see results, but from what I saw it does make a noticeable difference. You can have it as little as four weeks after giving birth, and also while breastfeeding. I saw it being done at the **London Medical and Aesthetic Clinic (020-8342 1100)**, where they charge around **£100 per session** (depending on the size of the area to be treated), but less if you block-book. If you visit the website you'll find a list of other accredited practitioners.