



**University Hospitals
Bristol and Weston**
NHS Foundation Trust

Patient information service
Maternity services

Reducing your risk of perineal tears during childbirth



What is a perineal tear

Your perineum is the area between your vagina and your anus. It is common for it to tear when you are giving birth, or sometimes your healthcare professional might recommend a cut to your perineum (episiotomy) if your baby needs to be born quickly or if you are at risk of a serious perineal tear.

9 out of 10 first-time mothers have a tear, graze or episiotomy from vaginal birth.

After birth, your midwife or doctor will offer you an examination to see if you have a tear and if it requires stitches.

Most tears heal within 6 weeks with no long-term problems. However, if you do have any problems from your tear (such as pain, difficulty going to the toilet, incontinence, or mental health problems) specialist help is available.

Approximately 3 to 4 out of 100 women who have give birth vaginally will have a deeper tear involving the anal sphincter muscle (sometimes called a third fourth degree tear), this is known as an obstetric anal sphincter injury, or an OASI. These deeper tears will need repair in an operating theatre. You will be supported by healthcare professionals including physiotherapists after your recovery from a third or fourth degree tear.

Prevention

Perineal tearing is a normal part of birth, however there are ways to reduce the risk of this happening or reduce the severity of the tear.

1. Perineal massage

Perineal massage can be of benefit if performed regularly for at least the last four weeks of pregnancy. From 34 to 35 weeks onwards, you may choose to try perineal massage until your baby is born, which has been shown to reduce the risk of tears. This is particularly beneficial for first-time mothers. You may wish to ask your partner to help with this.

Tips for perineal massage

- Comfortable position

You need to be relaxed during the massage, so it's important you find a comfortable position. The best place to perform this massage is in bed. Prop yourself up with pillows to support your back and bend your knees.

- Short nails

The tissues in your vagina and perineum are very delicate. Make sure your nails are short to prevent scratching the skin, or any discomfort to the area.

- Lubricant

Use a natural oil as lubricant such as vitamin E oil, almond oil or olive oil.

- Thumbs

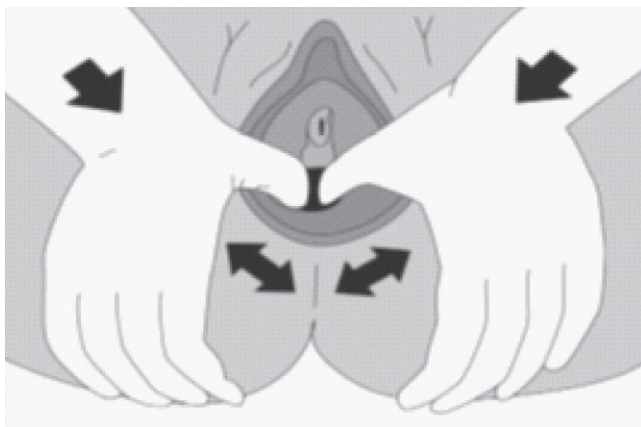
Hold your thumbs in the position shown for about 1 minute (diagram below). Press down towards the anus and to the sides of the vagina walls. Hold your thumbs in this position for about 1 minute. You will begin to feel a stretching sensation. Breathe deeply.

- Gentle massage

Gently massage the lower half of your vagina using a U-shaped movement for 2 to 3 minutes. Repeat this 2 to 3 times.

- Repeat daily or when possible

It may take a couple of weeks of daily massage before you notice more elasticity in your perineal area.



To watch our short perineal massage video, follow this link or QR code

<https://vimeo.com/744752046/3ac748aa2b>



2. Labour and birth positions

Your healthcare professional will work with you so that you can birth in your chosen position. A kneeling, all-fours position, or lying on your side may be beneficial and reduce the severity of tearing.

3. Warm compress

Your healthcare professional can gently place a warm compress (pad, swab or gauze) onto your perineum as the baby's head stretches the perineal tissues. This helps to warm the tissue and to increase stretchiness which can reduce the severity of tearing.

4. Hands-on birth

Your healthcare professional can support your perineum with their hands as your baby is being born. This is called manual perineal protection, or a 'hands-on birth'.

Manual perineal protection can be provided in any birth position, apart from in the water or on a birthing stool.

It is only used for a short period, during the birth of your baby and it can help to reduce the severity of tearing.

Your healthcare professional should also work with you to ensure that you have a slow and controlled birth by advising you to slow down or stop pushing. This is important to allow your perineum to stretch more slowly, which can reduce severity of tearing.

Notes

As well as providing clinical care, our Trust has an important role in research. This allows us to discover new and improved ways of treating patients.

While under our care, you may be invited to take part in research. To find out more please visit: www.uhbw.nhs.uk

Help us prevent the spread of infection in hospital. Please make sure your hands are clean. Wash and dry them thoroughly/use the gel provided. If you have been unwell in the last 48 hours please consider whether your visit is essential.

Smoking is the primary cause of preventable illness and premature death. For support in stopping smoking contact **NHS Smokefree on 0300 123 1044.**

Drinkline is the national alcohol helpline. If you're worried about your own or someone else's drinking, you can call this free helpline in complete confidence. **Drinkline on 0300 123 1110.**

For access all patient leaflets and information please go to the following address:
<http://foi.avon.nhs.uk/>

Bristol switchboard: 0117 923 0000
Weston switchboard: 01934 636 363
www.uhbw.nhs.uk



For an interpreter or signer please contact the telephone number on your appointment letter.



For this leaflet in large print or PDF format, please email patientleaflets@uhbw.nhs.uk.

