

Reducing perineal injury during birth – antenatal perineal massage

Where is my perineum?

Your perineum is the area of your body between your vagina and rectum (back passage). This area stretches during a vaginal birth of your baby. During the birth, while it is stretching, your perineum may also tear. In some circumstances, in discussion with you and with your consent, your midwife or doctor may need to perform an episiotomy, which is a cut to your perineum.

Will perineal massage during pregnancy help reduce perineal injury?

Many women experience some degree of perineal injury during a vaginal birth (40% to 85%), and may require stitches. There are many risk factors that contribute to tearing with birth and a number of these risk factors are uncontrollable. For example, women who are having their first vaginal birth are more at risk of perineal injury, as are women birthing bigger babies.

Research indicates that perineal massage can decrease the incidence of episiotomy in women who have not had a baby before. The evidence also suggests that perineal massage can reduce the incidence of perineal injury requiring stitches and may also reduce the incidence of perineal pain following birth. However there are no guarantees that perineal massage will ensure an intact (uninjured) perineum.

What is Perineal Massage?

Perineal Massage is performed by you or your partner to stretch and desensitise the tissue around the opening of the vagina in preparation for your birth. Performing perineal massage can help to familiarise the perineum with the stretching sensation and to decrease the stinging during the birth of your baby's head.

How do I do it?

- Ensure you and/or your partner's hands are clean.
- You may wish to use some lubrication like KY jelly, pure vegetable, vitamin E, or olive oil; avoid using mineral oils or petroleum jelly.
- Get comfortable, sitting on the toilet is often a good place, or make yourself comfortable on the bed if your partner is going to assist you.
- Use a mirror to identify the urethra (urinary opening). You need to avoid this area when performing perineal massage.
- Insert one or both thumbs or fingers inside the vaginal opening; press gently but firmly towards the anus until a stretching/stinging sensation is felt. Hold for up to two minutes, until the sensation decreases. Then massage perineum between thumb and index finger.
- Repeat, applying the pressure towards the sides of the vagina.
- Continue this for 5 – 10 minutes.
- If you wish, your partner may assist you with this by following the same directions as above. The pressure should be still downwards and side to side. It is important to communicate to your partner during the massage so that they are aware of your level of discomfort.

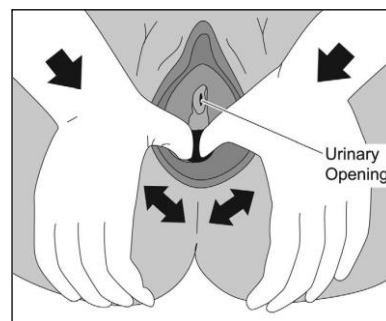


Figure 1: Example of perineal massage technique

When and how often should I do it?

Current research recommends commencing perineal massage from 35 weeks onwards, performing it a maximum 1 - 2 times per week prior to your expected date of birth.

What else can I do?

Research also shows that regular pelvic floor exercises during pregnancy increases your ability to relax the pelvic floor muscles during birth.

Can I use a perineal stretching device?

There is currently insufficient evidence to support promoting general use of these devices. However, if used, there may be some reduction in the incidence and severity of perineal injury.

Contraindications to perineal massage

- Active infection of the area such as genital herpes
- Thrush or other vaginal infection

Precautions prior to performing perineal massage

- Avoid the urethra to prevent trauma or infection
- If you have had previous perineal surgery please discuss with your care provider prior to commencing perineal massage
- If your waters have broken check with your primary carer prior to continuing perineal massage

If you have any concerns with this advice or exercises, or about your risk of tearing please contact your maternity care provider or women's health physiotherapist

References:

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You Tube Perineal Massage DVD.mpg' Brighton & Sussex University Hospital NHS Trust UK

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