Check for updates

Perineal Massage in Pregnancy

What is my perineum?

Your perineum is the area between your vaginal opening and your rectum. This area stretches when you give birth, and sometimes the perineum or vagina will tear as your baby is being born. If your health care provider cuts an episiotomy during your birth, it is this area that is cut. You may need stitches after your baby is born if you have a tear or have an episiotomy.

How often do perineal tears occur?

About 4 to 8 out of every 10 women who give birth vaginally will have some tear in their perineum. About two-thirds of these women will need some stitches.

Is an episiotomy necessary?

An episiotomy is not necessary for most women. Although they were common before the 1990s, they are rarely done today. However, sometimes your health care provider may recommend an episiotomy just as your baby is being born. For example, an episiotomy can help if your baby needs to be born very quickly. You can ask your health care provider to talk with you about episiotomy during a prenatal visit.

Can my health care provider do anything to help me avoid a tear?

There are many ways that your health care provider can help to reduce your chance of tearing. For example, your provider may:

- Apply a warm compress to the perineum just before the baby comes out
- Recommend specific positions for you to be in as you push
- Provide gentle downward pressure on the baby's head as your baby is coming out
- Ask that you push your baby out between contractions
- Avoid the use of forceps or a vacuum to help your baby be born

Can I do anything before the birth to help me avoid a tear?

Preventing a perineal tear that occurs during birth has been the subject of many research studies. Several studies have found that perineal massage during the last weeks of pregnancy can reduce tearing at birth for women giving birth for the first time. This massage—using 2 fingers to stretch your perineal tissues—is performed by you, in your home, once or twice a week, for the last 4 to 6 weeks of your pregnancy. The next page of this handout tells how to do this massage. For every 15 women who do perineal massage, one woman will avoid an episiotomy and perineal tearing that needs stitches. While you massage, you can practice relaxing the muscles in your perineum. This can help you prepare for the stretching, burning feeling you may have when your baby's head is born. Relaxing this area during birth can help prevent tearing.

Does perineal massage in pregnancy help all women?

Massage seems to work better for some women than others. Women having their first baby, women who are 30 years or older, and women who have had episiotomies before have fewer tears and less severe tears when perineal massage is done during the last weeks of pregnancy.

Can my partner help?

Yes! Many women find that it is easier to have their partners do this massage. See the instructions for perineal massage on the next page for more information.

1526-9523/09/$36.00 doi:10.1111/jmwh.12427
© 2016 by the American College of Nurse-Midwives

www.sharewithwomen.org

American College of Nurse-Midwives

Are there any risks to perineal massage during pregnancy?

Not that we know of. It is free. It doesn't hurt. It is easy to do. And most women don't mind doing it. However, you should not stretch the perineum until it hurts or massage too often, which can hurt the skin in that area. Do not do perineal massage more than once or twice a week. Women who do it more often do not have a lower risk of perineal tearing. Check with your health care provider before beginning perineal massage. And, if you believe your amniotic fluid (bag of waters) is leaking, check with your health care provider before putting anything in your vagina.

Instructions for Perineal Massage During Pregnancy

1. Wash your hands well, and make sure your fingernails are short. Relax in a private place where you can rest with your legs open and your knees bent. Some women like to lean on pillows for back support.
2. Lubricate your thumbs and the perineal tissues. Use a lubricant such as vitamin E oil, coconut oil, almond oil, or any vegetable oil used for cooking—like olive oil. You may also try a water-soluble jelly, such as K-Y jelly, or your body's natural vaginal lubricant. Do not use baby oil, mineral oil, or petroleum jelly (Vaseline).
3. Place your thumbs about 1 to 1.5 inches inside your vagina (see Figure 1). Press down (toward the anus) and to the sides until you feel a slight burning, stretching sensation.
4. Hold that stretched position for 1 or 2 minutes.
5. With your thumbs, slowly massage the lower half of the vagina using a U-shaped movement for 2 to 3 minutes at most. Concentrate on relaxing your muscles. This is a good time to practice slow, deep breathing techniques.
6. Partners: If your partner is doing the perineal massage, follow the same basic instructions above. However, your partner should use his or her index fingers to do the massage (instead of thumbs). The same side-to-side, U-shaped, downward pressure method should be used. Good communication is important—be sure to tell your partner if you have too much pain or burning!

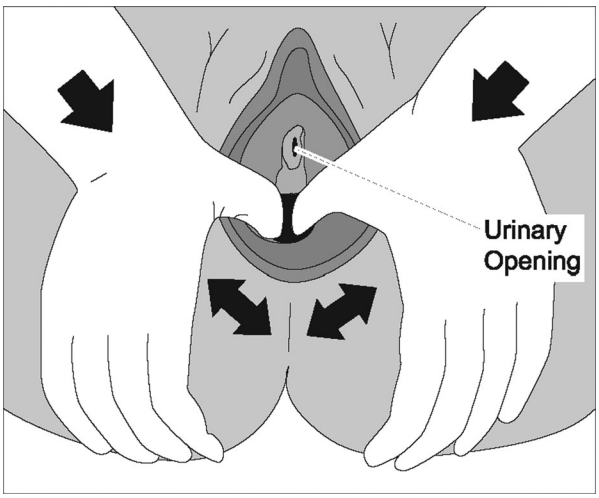

Figure 1. Perineal Massage

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 7.2

Approved January 2016. This handout replaces "Perineal Massage in Pregnancy" published in Volume 50, Issue 1, January/February 2005.

This page may be reproduced for noncommercial use by health care professionals to share with clients. Any other reproduction is subject to the Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health's *approval. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, the* Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health *suggests that you consult your health care provider.*

15422011, 2016, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jmwh.12427, Wiley Online Library on [20/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License