

Perineal tears during childbirth

What you need to know during pregnancy



Royal College of
Obstetricians &
Gynaecologists

Your perineum is the area between your vagina and your back passage (anus). It can tear when you are giving birth, or sometimes your healthcare professional might recommend a cut to your perineum (episiotomy) to make more room for your baby to be born.

9/10 First-time mothers have a tear, graze or episiotomy



After the birth of your baby a healthcare professional will offer you an examination to see if you have a tear. They will advise you if you need stitches. Most tears heal within 6 weeks with no long-term problems. For women who do have problems after a tear (such as pain, difficulty going to the toilet, incontinence or mental health problems) specialist help is available.

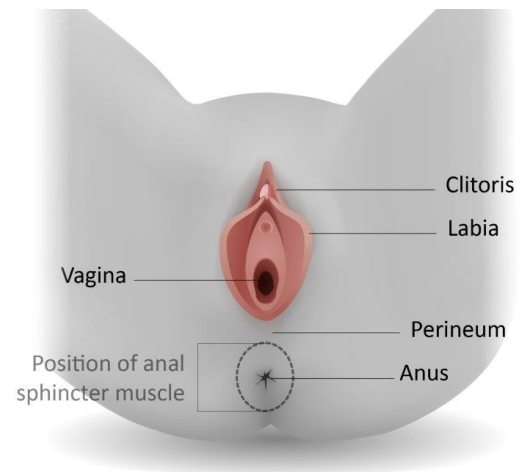
Approximately 6 out of 100 women giving birth for the first time and 2 out of 100 women who have given birth vaginally before will have a deeper tear involving the back passage/anal sphincter muscle (a 'third- or fourth-degree tear'). These deeper tears will need repair in an operating theatre. You will be supported by healthcare professionals including physiotherapists after your recovery from a third- or fourth-degree tear.

Perineal massage and 'hands-on' birth

A kneeling or all-fours birthing position may be beneficial and reduce the severity of tearing.

You can ask your healthcare professional to support your perineum as your baby is being born, which reduces the risk of a third- or fourth-degree tear. This is called 'hands-on' birth.

From 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.



Top tips

1. Use lubricant like vitamin E oil, almond oil or olive oil.
2. Hold one or both of your thumbs in the position shown for about one minute. You will begin to feel a stretching sensation. Keep breathing.
3. Gently massage the lower half of your vagina using a U-shaped movement for 2-3 minutes. Do this 2-3 times.
4. Repeat the massage daily, or when possible.

For more information about the types of tears that can happen in childbirth, and what can be done to help your recovery if you do tear, visit www.rcog.org.uk/tears