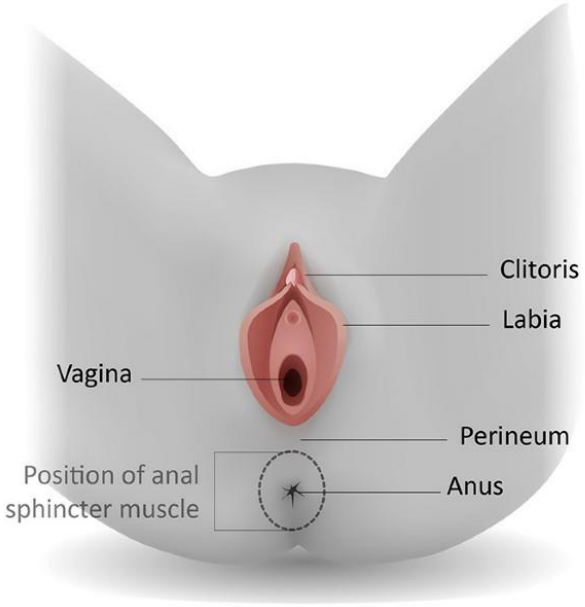
Perineal Tears during Childbirth
What you need to know during pregnancy

What is the perineum?

Your perineum is the area between your vagina and 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.



How likely am I to tear?

9 out of 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 to be repaired in an operating theatre. You will be supported by healthcare professionals including physiotherapists after your recovery from a third- or fourth-degree tear. A severe tear is more likely if:

- This is your first vaginal birth
- Your baby is over 4kg (9lb)
- Your baby's shoulder gets stuck behind the pubic bone (shoulder dystocia)
- You have an instrumental vaginal birth (forceps or vacuum-assisted)

Reducing severe tears

Perineal massage while pregnant:

Information for Patients

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. See RCOG Patient Information for more details.

Top tips for perineal massage:

- Use lubricant like vitamin E oil, almond oil or olive oil,
- 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.
- Gently massage the lower half of your vagina using a U-shaped movement for 2-3 minutes. Do this 2-3 times
- Repeat the massage daily, or when possible

Perineal protection at the time of birth

Birth position:
A kneeling or all-fours or lying on your side birthing position may be beneficial and reduce the severity of tearing.

Warm compress:
Your healthcare professional can gently place a warm compress (pad, swab, or gauze) on the perineum as the baby's head stretches the perineal tissues. This can help to reduce the severity of tearing.

A 'hands-on' birth:
Your healthcare professional can support your perineum 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.

Information for Patients

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.

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