

Fact Sheet

Perineal Massage



What and where is my perineum?

Your perineum is the area between the vagina (birth canal) and the anus and rectum (where you open your bowel) and is the area that stretches to allow your baby through in during childbirth.

This area gets stretched as the head is being born and, particularly with your first birth, may tear a little as the head comes out.

Performing perineal massage on yourself towards the end of your pregnancy can help prevent this from happening.

What is perineal massage?

Perineal massage is the method used to help stretch the skin and prepare you for the sensations of tingling, burning or stinging as your baby's head is born.

You or your partner can use your fingers, thumbs or both to rub and stretch the perineum. This helps to increase the stretchiness and flexibility of the perineum. It may also reduce your risk of having a tear or needing an episiotomy (a cut to the perineum made by your Midwife or Doctor in certain circumstances)

Why should I do perineal massage?

Studies have shown that:

- it can reduce tearing at birth for women having their first baby
- you are more comfortable and recover more quickly following the birth
- being more comfortable following the birth means you bond with your baby better and are able to care for them more easily

When should I start?

It is recommended that perineal massage starts between 34-35 weeks of your pregnancy, and is done once a day. Initially you may experience a strong stretching or burning sensation but over time you may start to notice a change in the flexibility and stretchiness of the skin and these feelings should decrease.

Getting Started

Before starting perineal massage you should:

- empty your bladder
- wash your hands
- find a relaxing place to perform perineal massage, such as your ; bathroom, bedroom or anywhere else you feel comfortable.
- sit or lean back. It may help to prop your hips comfortably with a pillow
- a warm bath or warm compress on the perineum for 10 minutes before may help with relaxation
- using a mirror for the first few times will help you to become familiar with the area you are massaging
- you can do the massage yourself but you may find it easier for your partner to do it
- use lubrication– this can be olive, wheat germ or almond oil or vitamin E cream

How to perform do perineal massage

- put the lubricant on your thumbs and around the perineum
- place your thumbs just inside the vagina, about 3-4 cm in depth

- press downward and to the sides at the same time, stretching your vagina open as wide as possible until you feel a tingling or burning sensation. Pause and take a deep breath
- keeping a steady pressure move your thumbs from side to side in a 'u' shaped motion. The area may become a little numb and you won't feel the tingling as much
- hold the stretch for 45-60 seconds and then release
- massage with more oil and stretch again to maximum hold then release. Do this daily for about 5– 10 minutes
- at first your perineum will feel tight but as you practice the tissues will relax and stretch. Focus on relaxed breathing, relaxing the your pelvic floor muscles and allowing the your tissues to stretch
- if your partner is helping you do perineal massage. Ensure they use clean hands and either their thumbs or one to two index fingers inside the lower part of the vagina. It is important to tell your partner how much pressure to apply without causing too much discomfort or pain.

When should I not perform perineal massage?

Perineal massage should not be performed

- before 34 weeks of pregnancy
- if you have a low lying placenta (placenta Praevia)
- if you have genital herpes, thrush or other vaginal infection, which may spread to other areas
- if you or your partner has an open wound or infection on the hands or fingers.

Other ways to help you avoid tearing can be found on Active birth, normal labour, water birth and managing your labour fact sheets.

