Perineal Massage

What is the perineum?
The perineum is the skin and muscle between your vagina and anus. This area stretches a lot during childbirth and sometimes tears or requires a cut (episiotomy). You may then need stitches to help healing.

Over 85% of women who give birth vaginally have some form of perineal trauma and 60-70% receive stitches.

Can I do anything before the birth to help me avoid a tear?
Several research studies have found that perineal massage during the last weeks of pregnancy can reduce tearing at birth. This massage – using two fingers to stretch your perineal tissues – is performed by you, in your home, once or twice daily, for the last 4-6 weeks of your pregnancy. Perineal massage is a way of preparing the perineum to stretch more easily during childbirth.

Can my partner help?
Yes! Many women find that it is easier to have their partners do this massage.

Are there any risks to perineal massage during pregnancy?
Do not do perineal massage if you have:
- Vaginal herpes
- Thrush
- Vaginal infection
- Ruptured membranes (your waters have broken)

Otherwise, we are not aware of any risks, but check with your doctor or midwife before commencing perineal massage.

Benefits of doing perineal massage during pregnancy
- Reduced risk of tearing or need for an episiotomy
- Reduced severity of tears and therefore less need for stitches
- Reduced perineal pain after birth
- Opportunity to practice relaxing pelvic floor muscles
- Familiarisation with the stretching/burning sensation of crowning

How do I do perineal massage?

Begin 4 - 6 weeks before your due date and follow these suggestions:
- Wash your hands well and keep your fingernails short
- Have a warm bath or apply a warm cloth to relax the perineum before starting
- Choose a private place and relaxed position with your knees bent and back supported by pillows.
- It may be useful the first few times to use a mirror – this will help you to identify the urethra (urinary opening), which you should avoid touching to prevent infection.
- Lubricate your thumbs and the perineum. Use a lubricant such as Vitamin E oil, or any vegetable oil used for cooking – like olive oil. You may also use K-Y gel, water or your body’s natural lubricant. Do not use baby oil, mineral oil or petroleum jelly.
• Place your thumbs about 3-4 cm inside your vagina (see diagram). Press down towards the anus and to the sides until you feel a slight burning, stretching sensation. Hold that position for 1-2 minutes.

• With your thumbs, slowly massage the lower half of the vagina using a "U" shaped motion. Concentrate on relaxing your muscles and practise slow, deep breathing techniques. Let your shoulders relax. As you massage, pull gently outward and forward on the lower part of the vagina. This helps stretch the tissues in much the same way that the baby's head will stretch it during birth.

• Massage the perineal area slowly for 10 minutes each day. After one or two weeks, you should notice more stretchiness and less burning in your perineum.

If your partner is doing the perineal massage, follow the same basic instructions above. However, your partner should use their 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.