Perineal Massage

Your perineum is the area between your vaginal opening and your rectum. This area stretches a lot during childbirth, and sometimes it tears. Perineal massage during pregnancy can prevent tearing and reduce the need for an episiotomy, a surgical incision of the perineum sometimes made during the last few pushes of labor to help deliver the baby. If you have a tear or an episiotomy during delivery, you may need stitches after your baby is born.

Perineal tears occur in 40% to 85% of all women who give birth vaginally. About two-thirds of these women will need stitches.

Episiotomies are usually not necessary but they are recommended in unusual circumstances, such as if your baby needs to be born very quickly.

There are many ways your health care provider can help to reduce your chances of tearing. For example, he or she may recommend specific pushing positions, provide gentle pressure on the baby’s head as it comes out, and/or avoid the use of forceps.

Perineal Massage during Pregnancy

• Some health care providers believe that perineal massage will increase the stretchiness of this area. This means you may lower your chance of tearing or needing an episiotomy during delivery.

• Reducing tearing has been the subject of many research studies. Several studies show that perineal massage during the last weeks of pregnancy can reduce tearing at birth. We recommend that you perform this massage – which uses two fingers to stretch your perineal tissues – on your perineum once or twice daily, for the last 4 to 6 weeks of your pregnancy. The illustration on the back of this page gives instructions on how to do this massage.

• Perineal massage helps some women more than others. Women having their first baby, women 30 years or older, and women who have had episiotomies before have fewer tears and less severe tears, if they have done perineal massage during their last weeks of pregnancy.

• Your partner can do this massage. For some women it is easier if their partner does the massage.

• There are no known risks for perineal massage and it does not hurt.

• If you think your bag of water is leaking, check with your health care provider before putting anything in your vagina.

• In general, check with your health care provider before you begin perineal massage to ensure it is recommended for you.

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Instructions

• Wash your hands well, and keep your fingernails short. Relax in a private place with your knees bent. Some women like to lean on pillows for back support.

• Lubricate your thumbs and the perineal tissues. Use a lubricant such as vitamin E oil or 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®).

• Place your thumbs about 1 to 1.5 inches inside your vagina (see illustration above). Press down (toward the anus) and to the sides until you feel a slight burning, stretching sensation. Hold that position for 1 or 2 minutes. With your thumbs, slowly massage the lower half of the vagina using a U-shaped movement. Relax your muscles. This is a good time to practice slow, deep breathing techniques.

• Massage your perineal area slowly for 10 minutes each day. After 1 to 2 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. Your partner should use his or her index fingers, however, 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.