

PERINEAL MASSAGE IN PREGNANCY

What Is My “Perineum”?

Your perineum is the area between your vaginal opening and your rectum. This area stretches a lot during childbirth, and sometimes it tears. If your health care provider cuts an episiotomy during birth, it is this area that is cut. You may need stitches after your baby is born if you have a tear or have an episiotomy.

I’m Concerned About Perineal Tears—How Often Do They Occur?

40% to 85% of all women who give birth vaginally will tear. About two thirds of these women will need stitches.

I’m Also Concerned About Episiotomies—Are They Necessary?

An episiotomy is usually not necessary. However, sometimes your care provider may recommend an episiotomy. For example, an episiotomy can help if your baby needs to be born very quickly. Ask your health care provider to talk with you about episiotomies.

Can My Health Care Provider Do Anything to Help Me Avoid a Tear?

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

Can I Do Anything *Before* The Birth To Help Me Avoid a Tear?

Reducing tearing has been the subject of many research studies. Several 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 to 6 weeks of your pregnancy. The flip side of this handout tells how to do this massage.

Does Perineal Massage in Pregnancy Help All Women?

Massage seems to work better for some women 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 when perineal massage is done during the last weeks of pregnancy.

Can My Partner Help?

Yes! Many women find that it is easier to have their partners do this massage. See the flip side for more information.

Are There Any Risks to Perineal Massage During Pregnancy?

Not that we know of. It is free. It doesn’t hurt. It is easy to do. And most women don’t mind doing it. However, you should check with your health care provider before beginning perineal massage. And, if you believe your bag of waters is leaking, check with your health care provider before putting anything in your vagina.

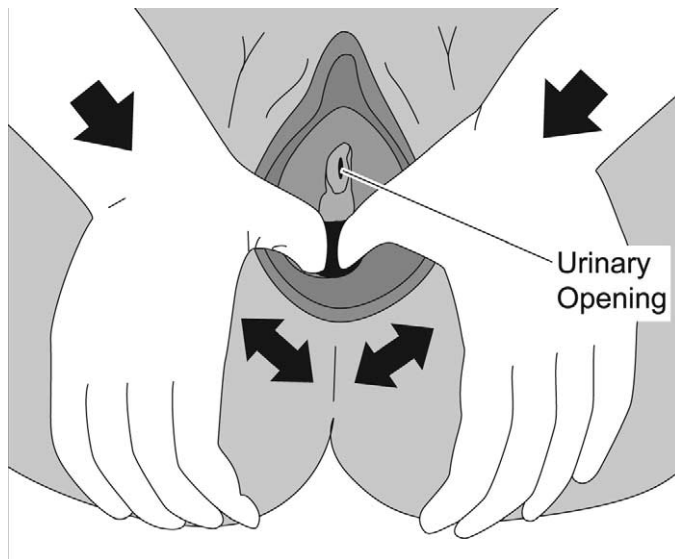


Figure 1. Perineal massage.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR PERINEAL MASSAGE DURING PREGNANCY

Here are some reasons you may want to use perineal massage during pregnancy:

- Some health care providers believe that perineal massage will increase the “stretchiness” of this area. This means you may have a smaller chance of tearing or needing an episiotomy.
- While you massage, you can practice relaxing the muscles in your perineum. This can help you prepare for the stretching, burning feeling you may have when your baby’s head is born. Relaxing this area during birth can help prevent tearing.

If you wish to use perineal massage, begin 6 weeks before your due date and follow these suggestions:

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.

Place your thumbs about 1 to 1.5 inches inside your vagina (see figure). 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. Concentrate on relaxing 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.

Partners: If your partner is doing the perineal massage, follow the same basic instructions, above. However, your partner should use his or her 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!