



Perineal Massage



What is the Perineum?

The Perineum is the soft tissue, muscles and skin area between the pubis and the coccyx. The softest part of this genital area is between the vagina and the anus, which isn't bordered or protected by the hard bones of the pelvis, and is prone to tearing during birth. The perineal area has to stretch considerably during the later part of Stage 2 Labour, as the baby's head crowns.

“Perineal stretching massage can increase a woman's confidence in her body's ability to stretch and open for her baby”.

www.midwifethinking.com

Why is Perineal Massage Beneficial?

- Perineal massage stimulates the flow of blood to the perineum - the skin around the vaginal opening and between the vagina and rectum.
- It prepares the skin for stretching over your baby's head during the delivery stage, increasing elasticity and reducing the risk of tearing or needing an episiotomy.
- It will also help you to become familiar with the sensations (stinging, burning, tingling) that are present during birth and allows you to feel more connected to the process.
- The use of oil also helps the skin to become more supple.

When Should it be Done?

Ideally the massage/stretching should be started around 32/34 weeks of pregnancy onwards, aiming at 3 times per week. It can be helpful to do after a bath when the skin is softer.

NB: **AVOID** if there are vulvic varicosities (haemorrhoids around the vulva); vaginal herpes; thrush.

“From my experiences as a midwife I have noticed that women who have done perineal massage are more likely to have perineums that stretch well around the baby's head. These women also have more control over the expulsion of the baby's head, and allow it to be born slowly.

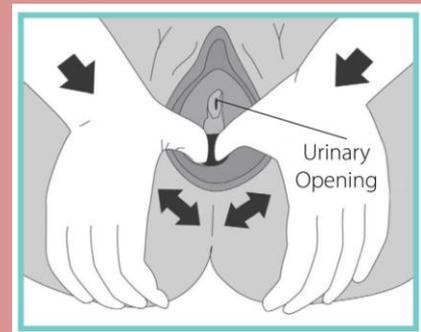
Because they are used to the sensations they are experiencing they are not frightened of them and don't rush the birth.”

www.babyworld.co.uk



How to Perform Perineal Massage/Stretching

1. Wash your hands.
2. Find a private, comfortable place and sit or lean back in a comfortable position. You may find it easier to squat. Some women lie on their side and bring their hand round the back. Use cushions to support your legs.
3. Use an unscented vegetable oil, such as sunflower oil or olive oil (preferably warmed) on your thumbs or fingers and around the perineum.
4. Place one or two thumbs (or fingers if you can't reach) about 1 inch (2-3cms) inside your vagina. Press downwards and to the sides at the same time. Gently and firmly keep stretching until you feel a slight burning, tingling or stinging sensation.
5. Hold the pressure steady at that point with your thumbs for about 2 minutes until the area becomes a little numb and you don't feel the tingling as much.
6. Keep pressing with your thumbs. Slowly and gently massage back and forth over the lower half of your vagina. Do this for 3-4 minutes. Remember to avoid the urinary opening. You can start with very gentle massage, increasing the pressure as sensitivity is reduced.
7. As you massage, pull gently outwards (forwards) on the lower part of the vagina with your thumb(s) hooked inside. This helps stretch the skin as the baby's head will stretch it during birth. Work in a U shape.
8. Over time, you may be able to increase the pressure and number of fingers used. You may prefer to use thumb and finger combination. Find what works for you.



Birthing Gently

One of the best ways to keep the perineum intact is to birth gently – allowing the skin and tissues time to slowly stretch, unfold and relax over the baby's head. There is actually no benefit to forcefully pushing in Stage 2 (unless Mum is lying on her back, with no gravity to assist, or there is a medical reason to get the baby out quickly – foetal heart distress, meconium present etc). In an upright position, gravity and contractions will do most of the work. A good Midwife will check the status of the tissues and know when to ask Mum to stop pushing (c/f '**Feather Breath**'). Water Births may also reduce the likelihood of tearing.

Ina May Gaskin advises "*breathing the head out. Go slowly, a little bit at a time. If you can hold back the force for even just half a second, it can change the whole quality of your skin – it will relax and become more pliant and stretchy*" in 'Spiritual Midwifery'.

Sheila Kitzinger says "*with skilled guidance at delivery and a gentle birth, more and more women are now giving birth with no injury to the perineum*" in 'The Complete Guide to Pregnancy and Childbirth'.

Another useful resource is the blog: <http://www.giving-birth-naturally.net/avoid-tearing.html>