



Perineal Massage

Perineal massage during pregnancy involves the gentle, manual stretching of the tissues that shape the birth canal. It's one of the things that we can do during pregnancy to help avoid episiotomies and perineal tears during labour.

A number of studies have demonstrated quite conclusively that perineal massage can help women giving birth, even for the first time, to avoid episiotomies and severe tearing. Large perineal tears and surgical cuts (episiotomies) require stitching, which can lengthen recovery time after delivery and often cause scarring, pain and urinary or fecal incontinence that can negatively impact your life long after childbirth. Please note however that sometimes tears and episiotomies will be unavoidable, despite our best efforts (breach births, shoulder dystocia, etc).

Your perineum includes the area at the back of your vagina and vulva and goes to your anus and rectum, and includes the back portion of the birth canal. It's the tissues of your perineum that create a strong pelvic floor, allow you to walk upright and prevent you from urinating every time you cough. Needless to say, it's important that these tissues are intact and strong, but they also need to be flexible enough to stretch during childbirth to allow the baby to move through the birth canal.

The techniques involved are extremely low tech. This can be done either solo or you can have your partner help you while you're lying on a towel on your bed. Have some natural lubricant ready – olive oil, coconut oil, vitamin E oil and almond oil are all good choices. Use a lubricant that you know you aren't allergic to (you can do a spot test on your arm first to test). Avoid Vaseline or other petroleum-based jellies, baby oil, and mineral oils.

Perineal massage also gives you the opportunity to practice relaxing the muscles in your perineum while you experience the stretching, burning sensation you will feel when your baby's head starts to crown (a sneak peek for first time Mamas of what this will feel like during labour).



Plan to do the perineal massage for four minutes, three to four times per week from the 34th week of pregnancy onward.

Instructions:

Take a warm bath or apply a warm compress to your perineum for five to ten minutes before you begin your massage, then find a quiet place to relax.

On your own:

1. Get into a semi-seated position with plenty of back support. Ensure that you've washed your hands and that your fingernails are well trimmed
2. Use plenty of lube – apply it to your thumbs and your perineal tissues
3. Insert your thumbs 3-5 cm inside your vagina. Your thumbs should be resting on your perineum, pointing downward toward your anus. Press downward (toward your anus) and pull outwards (sideways) until you feel a burning and stretching sensation. Try to hold this position for 1-2 minutes. Breathe slowly and deeply
4. Using your thumbs, massage the lower half of your vagina using a U-shaped motion. Breathe slowly and deeply

With a partner:

Ask your partner to follow the instructions above. It may be easier for him or her to use their index fingers rather than their thumbs to apply the U-shaped downward motion. Be sure to let your partner know how much pressure is enough and how much is too much.

If you make a point to practice this as indicated above, you should notice that your perineal area has become more stretchy and that you experience less burning during the exercise.