

Patient information factsheet

How to care for your perineum after the birth of your baby

The perineum (also called the perineal area) is the skin and muscular area between the vagina and the rectum (also called your back passage).

Bruising and tears

It is very common to experience bruising and tears in the perineal area when you give birth as the opening of your vagina and your perineum need to stretch to allow room for your baby to be born.

Tears can occur in the perineum, labia (lips of the vagina) and inside the vagina. The size of the tear may also vary:

- A first-degree tear is a superficial tear to the skin of the perineum.
- A second-degree tear is deeper affecting both the skin and muscle of the perineum.
- Third and fourth degree tears are less common, involving the muscles around the rectum (the internal and external anal sphincter muscles) and in the case of fourth degree tears, the rectum itself.

Episiotomies

An episiotomy is a surgical cut in the perineum, which is made to enlarge your vagina and help you give birth to your baby.

You may have needed an episiotomy for three reasons:

- if you had an assisted birth (with forceps or ventouse)
- if your baby became distressed during birth
- if your midwife thought your perineum would tear badly

Stitches (also known as sutures)

You will have had an examination of your perineum immediately after your baby's birth which will have allowed your midwife or obstetrician to identify any grazes or tears you may have sustained and discuss their severity with you. There may be grazes or very small tears which will heal without the need for stitches, however, repair is offered if you have had an episiotomy and for tears:

- that involve the muscle layers of the perineum
- that are bleeding
- that are not well aligned (jagged)

Stitches stop any bleeding from a tear and join the skin and muscle together. The number of stitches varies according to the location and severity of the tear, however, the thread used to suture is dissolvable so they do not have to be removed.

The stitches start to dissolve after about ten days and have usually completely disappeared after six weeks. It is normal to find small pieces of the stitch material when you are bathing or when you go to the toilet.

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Tears and episiotomies will cause pain and discomfort after birth. Sometimes passing urine or emptying your bowels can be painful, but you should experience continual improvement. It can take up to six weeks for your perineum to heal and may take up to six months for you to feel completely comfortable again. If you have any questions or concerns about the healing process, please speak to your midwife or GP.

Your stitches will be examined to make sure they are healing well. Please let your midwife or GP know if:

- your perineal area becomes hot, swollen, weepy, smelly or very painful
- tears which have been repaired start to open
- you develop a temperature and flu-like symptoms

In any of these instances you may be developing an infection and need treatment with antibiotics.

Looking after your stitches

Your midwife will give you specific advice on hygiene, pain-relieving drugs and self-help measures, all of which will help to reduce your discomfort. However, here are some general tips to help you to feel more comfortable and help your perineum to heal:

- Make sure you have paracetamol at home to use for pain relief once you leave hospital. While in hospital, your midwife will be able to give you stronger pain relief if you need it. Your midwife will discuss the frequency and dose with you before you go home. You should not wait until you are in pain, but take pain relief on a regular basis for the first few days.
- Always wash your hands before and after you go to the toilet and/or change your sanitary towel, especially when you go home. You should change your sanitary towel at least every four hours. Ensure it is secured in place so it doesn't move around and cause further irritation.
- Drinking plenty of water will keep your urine diluted, this will help reduce irritation when you pass urine.
- Pat the area dry from front to back to avoid introducing germs from the rectum into the perineal and vaginal area.
- Begin doing gentle pelvic floor exercises as soon as you can after the birth to increase your blood supply to the area and help the healing process. These exercises will also help your pelvic floor regain its tone and control. Please discuss these with your midwife and ensure you have a copy of the booklet entitled 'Shape up after pregnancy'. This is available from your midwife or you can download a copy from www.uhs.nhs.uk/maternity
- Avoid standing or sitting for long periods of time and ensure you are comfortable when sitting to feed your baby. Try lying on your side to feed, if sitting for long periods of time is uncomfortable.
- Avoid using perfumed soaps when washing your perineum. Frequent baths or bidets are soothing but staying in the bath too long will slow down the healing process.
- Avoid wearing tight trousers, jeans or tights.
- When you get home and have some privacy, you may find lying in bed without a sanitary towel and letting your perineum 'air dry' offers some relief.

Having your bowels open

You can safely open your bowels without any damage occurring to your perineum or stitches after the birth. The first few times you have your bowels open, hold a clean pad against your perineum to protect your stitches.

- If you are unable to open your bowels, your midwife can give you the medicine lactulose (a stool softener) and Fybogel™ (a high fibre drink). This will help you to have your bowels open without straining and avoid constipation.
- Drinking plenty of fluids and eating a well-balanced diet that includes fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as fibre, will also help you to avoid constipation.

What about sex?

It is quite safe to have sex when you feel ready but remember the need to use contraception from three weeks after your baby's birth. The first few times you have sex use a lubricating jelly and try out different positions to find one that is comfortable to you. Don't be surprised if it feels different.

In the first weeks and even months you may have no desire for sex at all and this is completely normal.

Further sources of information and support

This factsheet is intended to give you information and answer any of your immediate questions. Please feel free to discuss any further questions and concerns with your midwife or GP.

Alternatively you may wish to contact:

Community midwifery coordinator (7.30am to 5.30pm) **023 8120 4909** and **07786 266529**

Broadlands Birth Centre (out of hours) **023 8120 6012**

New Forest Birth Centre (out of hours) **023 8074 7690**

Factsheets offering advice on 'Shaping up after pregnancy' and 'Recovery after an assisted birth' are also available. Please speak to your midwife or visit www.uhs.nhs.uk/maternity to download a copy.

Birth Afterthoughts

If you would like to discuss the birth of your baby in more detail, please contact Birth Afterthoughts on **023 8120 6834**.

For a translation of this document, or a version in another format such as easy read, large print, Braille or audio, please telephone **023 8120 4688**.

For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalneeds