

Perineal Massage

The **perineum** is the skin between the back of the vagina and the anus.

Perineal massage is a technique which may be used by pregnant women to become familiar with the type of sensations that will occur during the second stage of labour (the birth of the baby). It is also believed by some to minimize the degree of tearing or to help avoid a tear. However, there has yet to be good research evidence to prove or disprove this belief. Perineal massage can help a woman to identify pelvic floor muscles and learn to relax them in response to pressure. Massaging the oil into the perineum may also soften the tissue. This may increase its elasticity and suppleness, helping to avoid tearing or episiotomy. The following instructions are provided for those who may be interested in trying perineal massage.

Instructions:

1. The massage should be done with some type of vitamin E oil. Good sources are wheat germ oil, olive oil or almond oil. Pure vitamin E oil is excellent but expensive.
2. Beginning about 4-6 weeks before your due date, the massage can be performed daily for at least 5 minutes. After bathing is a good time because the tissue is warm and relaxed.
3. Either you or your partner can do the massage. Before you begin you may want to look at your perineum with a mirror to help you visualize the muscles and tissue to be worked on. If you do the massage yourself you may want to try standing with one foot resting on a stool or the toilet; this assists you in reaching the vagina. If your partner is going to perform the massage the most comfortable position for you will probably be semi-sitting on the bed, propped with pillows.
4. Doing the massage: If you are doing the massage yourself it is probably easiest to use your thumbs. Your partner can use his or her index fingers. Coat your fingers with oil and gently insert them into the vagina approximately 2 inches. Move them in a rhythmic U or sling type movement. This movement will stretch the vaginal tissue (mucosa), the muscles surrounding the vagina and the skin of the perineum. In the beginning you will feel tight, but with time and patience, the tissue will relax and stretch. Concentrate on relaxing your muscles as you apply pressure. Locate any scar tissue (if you have previously had a tear or episiotomy) and concentrate on massaging and working oil into this area to soften it.
5. As you become comfortable massaging (especially the last 2 weeks before delivery) use enough pressure until the perineum just begins to sting or burn from the tension you apply. This stinging sensation is similar to the feeling you will get as the baby's head is being born and the perineum stretches around it. Try to associate a pattern of breathing (blowing or panting – **not** pushing) with this feeling. Concentrate on relaxing, releasing, and blowing out as your partner stretches the vaginal opening to the point of burning. Practicing this will help prepare you for the crowning of your baby's head.
6. Additional measures to aid in preventing a tear of episiotomy:
 - a) Squat, sit cross-legged, and do pelvic floor exercises **regularly!**
 - b) Good nutrition helps promote elasticity of skin. Get adequate amounts of vitamins A, C, and E in your diet daily. These vitamins function in the body to preserve the structural and functional properties of cells. Pregnant women should not take more than 5000-6000 IU of vitamin A and not more than 1000mg of vitamin C (250-500mg is adequate). If you are taking vitamin E supplements (200-300 IU is adequate) as well take extra iron, and take these at least 8 hours apart to ensure good absorption of both.