

Perineal tears

This information sheet aims to answer some commonly asked questions about perineal tears.

IMPORTANT: This is general information only. Ask your doctor or midwife about what care is right for you.

What is a perineal tear?

The perineum is the area between your vagina and anus. During childbirth the perineum can tear. These tears are classified from 1 to 4 according to which areas are torn.

What is a 1st degree tear?

A 1st degree tear is a shallow tear to the skin of the perineum. Sometimes a 1st degree tear needs stitches, and other times it can heal without stitches.

What is 2nd degree tear?

A 2nd degree tear is a tear to the skin and muscle layers of the perineum. 2nd degree tears heal better when they are repaired with stitches.

What are 3rd and 4th degree tears?

A 3rd degree tear is a tear through the perineal muscles and into the ring-shaped muscle that surrounds the anus (the anal sphincter). A 4th degree tear goes through the anal sphincter and into the anus. You can find out more by reading the QCG parent information *Third and fourth degree tears*.

What is an episiotomy?

An episiotomy is a cut made with scissors at the entrance to the vagina to enlarge the opening for the birth of your baby's head. The cut goes through the skin and muscles, and is similar to a 2nd degree tear.

An episiotomy may be recommended:

- When instruments are used to assist the birth of your baby (e.g. forceps)
- To quicken the birth if your baby becomes distressed
- If a significant perineal tear is considered likely

How common are perineal tears?

About 30% of women in Queensland have no tears (an intact perineum) with a vaginal birth. About 15% have an episiotomy. Very few women (less than half a percent) have a third or fourth degree tear.

Can you reduce your risk of tearing?

Massaging your perineum during late pregnancy can reduce your risk of needing an episiotomy. Doing pelvic floor muscle exercises in combination with massaging your perineum can reduce your risk of tearing. During labour and birth, the following things can reduce your chance of tearing:

- Lying on your side, kneeling, standing or being on your hands and knees when you give birth
- Avoiding long stretches of time squatting, sitting, or using a birth stool when you are pushing
- Having a midwife hold a warm, wet washcloth (compress) on your perineum while you are pushing
- Pushing in a slow and controlled way during the final stage of birth. Listening to your midwife and/or doctor will help you with this
- Having a midwife massage your perineum in the final stages of labour

What happens if you need stitches?

If you need stitches, they are usually done soon after your baby is born. Your health care provider will discuss the procedure with you. Local anaesthetic is used to make sure you don't feel any pain. If you have an epidural then you may not need any local anaesthetic as the area may still be numb.

The stitches don't usually need to be removed because they dissolve by themselves. Some stitches may need to be taken out later, but this is not common. The tear or cut usually heals within a few weeks. You may notice some of the stitches fall out—this is normal.

What can you do to help a tear heal?

To help a tear heal:

- Rest and lie on your side as much as you can
- Keep the tear as clean and dry as possible by changing pads frequently, showering at least daily and patting the area dry. This helps to prevent infection
- Avoid positions and activities that place pressure on the muscles or restrict blood flow to the area (e.g. avoid sit ups, lifting, and high impact exercise)
- Start gentle pelvic floor muscle exercises 2 to 3 days after you have your baby

Is there a good way to use the toilet?

While your tear is healing:

- Sit on the toilet and lean forward with your elbows slightly bent and hands resting on your knees
- Use a foot stool or lift your heels up so that your knees are above your hips
- Relax your stomach and breathe normally
- Take your time to empty your bladder and bowel. Avoid pushing or straining. You can support the area with your hand and a pad to lessen stretching and pain
- To prevent infection, wipe front to back with soft toilet paper or baby wipes. Wash and pat dry the area after using the toilet

How can you reduce the pain of the tear?

- Rest and lie on your side as much as you can
- Put ice wrapped in a cloth on your tear for 10–20 minutes. Do this as often as you want to over the first few days
- If you need to cough, sneeze, blow your nose or empty your bowels, you might like to support your perineum with your hand or a cushion to help prevent stretching
- Keep bowel motions soft by drinking at least 2 litres of fluid a day, eating fruits and vegetables often, and taking laxatives if prescribed
- Take pain relief medication such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Codeine and medications that contain codeine are not recommended if you are breastfeeding. They can also cause constipation and make it more painful for you to have a bowel movement.

When can you have sex after birth?

You can have sex after birth whenever it feels right for you. Health care providers might suggest waiting until your bleeding has stopped and the tear has healed. This may take several weeks. A small number of women may find sex painful after birth. Talk to your health care provider if you are worried.

When should you contact your health care provider?

You should contact your health care provider or local hospital if:

- You have a temperature
- Your stitches become more painful, swollen or smelly
- Sex is painful for you

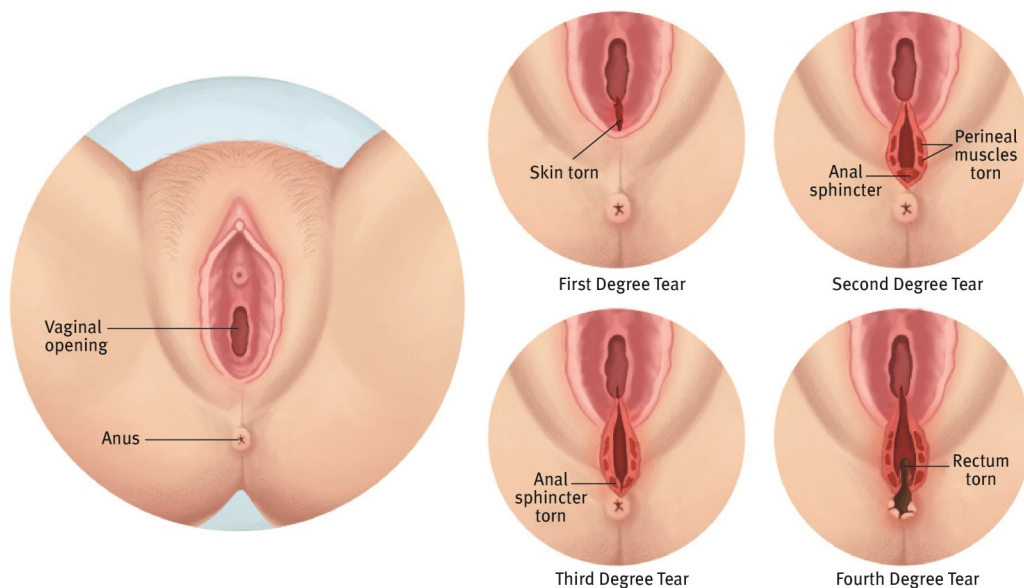


Figure 1: Types of perineal tears

Support & Information

13HEALTH (13 432584) is a phone line that provides health information, referral and services to the public.

Bladder and bowel problems (1800 330 066) is the website to assist with the prevention and management of bladder and bowel problems www.bladderbowel.gov.au

Pregnancy, Birth & Baby Helpline (1800 882 436 - free call) offers free, confidential, professional information and counselling for women, their partners and families relating to issues of conception, pregnancy, birthing and postnatal care www.health.gov.au/pregnancyhelpline

Women's Health Queensland (1800 017 676) is the website for Women's Health Queensland Wide, a health service where nurses and midwives can answer questions from women about their health www.womhealth.org.au

Lifeline (13 11 14) offers a telephone crisis support service to anyone www.lifeline.org.au