

Your Health Education

Perineal Tears during Childbirth: What to Expect

A tear can happen when you deliver your baby through the birth canal. A tear can happen to your vagina, your perineum or both. Your perineum (say "pair-uh-NEE-um") is the area between your vagina and anus. A tear could also affect your anus and rectum, but this is much less common. This care sheet gives you a general idea about what to expect about tears during childbirth.

Most women who deliver a baby through the birth canal, especially first-time moms, experience some tearing as a natural part of childbirth. The good news is that most tears are small, are stitched quickly right after you have delivered your baby, and most heal very well.

Types of Tears (Degrees of Tears):

1st Degree: Only skin tore. This type of tear may heal on its own and not even require stitches.

2nd Degree: Skin and muscles of the vagina or perineum tore. This is the most common type of tear. This type requires a couple of stitches. The doctor or midwife usually places the stitches quickly, right after you deliver the baby.

3rd Degree: Skin, muscles of the vagina, and muscles of the anus tore. This type of tear is less common. You will need a few more stitches than a Second Degree, and sometimes the doctor or midwife will move you to a different room to place the stitches if necessary.

4th Degree: Skin, muscles of the vagina, muscles of the anus, and part of the rectum tore. This is the least common type of tear. This type of tear needs the most stitches and the doctor or midwife may move you to a different room to perform the repair. If you are moved to a different area, don't worry - you will get to go back to your room (and your baby!) after the stitches are placed.

What is an episiotomy?

An episiotomy is like a 2nd degree tear, except that the doctor or midwife creates the tear on purpose to help get the baby out. After the baby is delivered, the episiotomy is repaired like a vaginal tear.

What can I expect if I have a tear?

After the baby comes out, the doctor or midwife will examine the vagina and perineum to determine the type of tear. If stitches are needed, the doctor or midwife will often be able to place the stitches in the same room where you delivered (although sometimes you will be moved temporarily to a different room). The doctor or midwife will make sure you are comfortable. If you are in pain, the doctor or midwife can give you either extra numbing medicine in the vagina or through your IV. Once you are comfortable, the doctor or midwife will

place the stitches in the vagina to close the tear. After the stitches are placed, they will clean you off and then you will be able to rest and hold your new baby. Sometimes you may be allowed to hold the baby while the doctor or midwife is placing the stitches, if you are comfortable!

What can I expect after the stitches are placed?

After the doctor or midwife places the stitches, you will be sore in the area. The nurses will give you ice packs and spray that you can put over the vagina for pain and swelling.

The stitches will dissolve in about 2 weeks, so they will not need to be removed.

Recovery can be uncomfortable or painful, depending on how deep and long the tear is. It's most painful at the beginning and gradually gets better over 1-2 weeks.

A tear is usually healed completely in about 6 weeks. The good news is that most tears heal quickly without any problems.

Can I prevent myself from tearing?

Most tears cannot be prevented, but there are some methods that may make tears during childbirth or needing stitches less likely:

- One method is by gently massaging your vagina and perineum before delivery, starting when you are around 34 weeks pregnant.
- The other method is by placing a warm compress over your vagina and perineum while you are pushing during labor.

If you are interested in either of these during or before delivery, you should ask your doctor or midwife for more information!

Will I be able to breastfeed if I have a tear?

Yes. If you are interested in breastfeeding, you will still be able to do this. A vaginal tear will not change whether or not you can breastfeed.

Other questions?

If you have a tear during delivery, remember the good news is that most tears are either 1st or 2nd degree tears and most heal very well. Your doctor or midwife will explain the type of tear that you have and will be able to give you more specific instructions after you deliver. You should talk to your doctor or midwife if you have any specific questions or concerns.