

Prevent Tearing During Birth

TIPS TO MINIMIZE YOUR RISK

- **Good, balanced nutrition** – A well-nourished body has healthier skin that is more likely to stretch with the birth process. Remember proper hydration and healthy fats.
- **Exercise** – General exercise improves circulation, which in turn improves skin elasticity.
 - Squatting on a daily basis with your feet flat on the floor promotes elasticity of the perineum.
 - Kegel practice throughout pregnancy helps encourage baby put its chin to chest during birth, which makes the smallest part of the baby's head to come first. The smaller part coming first helps the perineum to stretch more gently.
- **Air** – For the health of the perineum (and your vagina), avoid tight fitting clothes and wear breathable cotton underwear.
- **No harsh products** – Consider the soaps, lotions, and other products you use on your body. Harsh products may cause drying, remove the natural oils, and/or cause irritation to the skin, especially the sensitive, thin skin of the perineum.
- **Perineal Massage** – Applying lotion/oils on the perineum can be soothing, but exaggerated perineal massage may not be necessary. Gentle massage as you apply the lotion, similar to the massage application for your belly, is appropriate and beneficial.
- **Epi-No** – This German product is an inflatable balloon-like device that's inserted into the vagina. It stretches the perineum to “train” it in the weeks before your due date. According to the company's website, in 2000, a trial found that daily training could possibly “reduce injuries to the vulva as well as the vagina significantly.”
- **Discuss episiotomy with your provider** – Thankfully, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) advises against routine episiotomies. You'll still want to ask your provider how often they do this procedure. A midline episiotomy (straight down) contributes to the risk of severe perineal trauma by increasing the chance the cut will extend. However, a mediolateral episiotomy (extends down at 45-degree angle) cuts through more nerves and perineal structures. Moreover, episiotomy has been associated with increased risk of postpartum anal incontinence.

- **Be patient and push baby out gently** - Some babies come out quickly in second stage, others take their time and ease out; let the baby do its thing. Push to the point of comfort, or don't actively bear down at all. Tune into your body and follow those instincts. Easing your baby out slowly will allow the perineum tissues to gently give way.
- **Rethink Birthing Positions** - It is beneficial to have the freedom to position yourself as your body directs.
 - Squatting - shortens the vaginal canal and opens the outlet of the pelvis.
 - Side-lying, hands and knees - slow things down and are less stressful for the perineum.
 - Kneeling - uses gravity but does not overstretch the perineum.
 - Regardless of position, make sure your knees are not very wide apart. This happens often in the lithotomy position (lying down with legs held up and open). This can over-stretch the perineum sideways and make it more likely that tearing will occur.
- **Water** - In 2009, a Cochrane Review determined there were no differences in tearing between birthing in water than land, yet many midwives swear by warm water to soften perineal tissues and ease the discomfort of crowning. Either way, there are various other benefits to laboring in water.
- **Warm compress against the perineum** - Warmth increases the blood flow and softens the muscles. Some people find the warm compress very comforting and others prefer their care providers adopt a hands-off approach. There is some research that suggests that any hands, aside from the birthing person's, either doesn't help or actually can cause harm. More studies need to be done.
- **Use a lubricant** - Applying a lubricant, such as warmed olive oil (hospitals may have mineral oil), can decrease friction and help the baby slide out. Some hospitals use baby shampoo which has some downsides. Discuss with your provider what will be available, and your preferences.
- **Make your preferences known** - Do not assume that your provider knows what you want. Talk to them ahead of time and make sure they are in agreement so there are no surprises. Remind them of your wishes closer to birth. Then at the birth, remind them again or clue in the on-call provider - this would be a good task for your partner or doula.