



### **Preparing the Perineum for Birth**

The perineum is a strong flexible muscle between the opening of the vagina and the anus. This muscle needs to stretch considerably to allow your baby's head to be born. Massaging the perineal area during the last *3-4 weeks of pregnancy* will help increase the elasticity of the tissues in this area and accustom you to the stretching sensations of second stage as the baby's head emerges. Perineal massage will not necessarily prevent a tear or need for episiotomy, but will help to *increase stretchiness and de-sensitize the area to pressure and stretching*. It can be performed by your partner or by yourself. Some women find it a little awkward with their tummy in the way towards the end of pregnancy and prefer to involve their partners in the activity. However, some women manage just fine on their own.

#### **Performing perineal massage**

- A warm bath or shower helps to relax both you physically and mentally. The water will also soften your perineum just as it does the rest of your skin. If you don't have a bath, a warm compress on the perineum can help you relax before beginning. This is all optional.
- Choose a lubricant – natural oils such as apricot kernel or almond is fine
- Use lots of pillows so that you are comfortable in a semi-reclining position. Legs should be comfortably apart, feet flat and knees bent.
- Using a little of the oil on your or your partners thumbs, apply onto the outside perineal tissues. Then insert thumbs (perhaps one at a time) *slowly and gently* about 3-4cms inside the vagina and slowly press them back down onto the inside vaginal wall towards the rectum and then out to the sides; working in a 'U' shape
- Gently stretch the opening until you feel a slight burning or tingling. Try and hold stretch for approximately 60 seconds (the length of an average contraction). Then rest for a minute or two. This allows you to recover and to let the blood circulate into the perineum again
- The massage can also be done with a sweeping motion from side to side, with the fingers either moving together in one direction or in opposite directions, according to your preference
- The area may become a little numb, this is normal. You may need to work up to this time frame each time.
- Continue the 'U' shaped stretching and holding for about 3-5 minutes overall. Also concentrating on any previous episiotomy scars, which will be especially inelastic
- The massage can also be done with a sweeping motion from side to side, with the fingers either moving together in one direction or in opposite directions, according to your preference

### **Some tips:**

- During the gentle stretch use your out-breath to help you relax your pelvic floor and perineum, allowing it to 'give'. Your in-breath through the nose should be deep. Your out-breath through the mouth should be slow; breathing right down to the perineum and then slowly releasing the breath as you follow through with the stretch.
- If you have never done perineal massage before, it may feel a little strange initially but each time you do it you'll be surprised at how 'elastic' the tissues become and how used to the sensations you become.
- If your partner is doing it, communicate with each other during the massage. The woman should let you know to go slower, to be softer or apply a little more pressure

**DO NOT** perform perineal massage if you have herpes or any other infections are present. The massage can spread and possibly inflame the infection or outbreak. If using oil try to keep most of it on the perineum, rather than inside the vagina. Oil in the vagina can upset the normal balance of micro-organisms, making you prone to thrush or Gardnerella.

### **Other factors that help prevent tears or the need for episiotomy during birth include:**

- The *position you are in* - being upright uses gravity to help the baby's descent down the birth canal and also allows you to control this rate of descent with your posture. Not only does this make for a safer and more efficient birth, it also gives the pelvic floor muscles and the perineal tissues time to 'fan out' evenly under the pressure of the baby's head.
- *The care and skill of the midwife/doctor supporting your birth.*
- '*Panting*' when your baby's head is crowning (as its very difficult to push and pant at same time!)
- *Avoiding the use of epidural analgesia*, which 'disconnects' you from your body and therefore takes away your awareness of your perineal area. Epidurals also increase the needs for the use of forceps and/or vacuum extractions which often require routine episiotomy.

**Conscious nutrition** – nutrients needed for healthy collagen and 'stretchy' connective tissue include zinc, essential fatty acids, vitamin C and vitamin E.