

PRENATAL PERINEAL MASSAGE

Perineal massage prepares the birth outlet for the coming stresses of birth. Massage may be done prenatally by you or your partner, depending on how comfortable you are with the procedure. Because relaxation of the perineal area is important to a good massage, your comfort in touching your vagina, or your comfort in your partner's touch needs to be considered. A warm bath or warm compresses on the perineum can help relax the muscles before beginning.

To do your massage, wash your hands, get a mirror, lean back comfortably on pillows, and look at your perineum. See where the perineum and vaginal opening are and what they look like. Put unscented lubricant (olive oil, coconut oil, vitamin E oil, K-Y jelly) on your thumbs or on the perineal area. Place your thumbs inside your vagina and press the perineal floor towards the rectum and to the sides. Gently stretch the opening, pressing down until you feel a slight burning or tingling. At this point, maintain the stretch and pressure for approximately 2 minutes until the area becomes somewhat numb. Then slowly and gently work the lubricant in with your thumbs still maintaining the same pressure and stretch. **AVOID THE URETHRAL AREA** because of potential infection. Massage for 3 – 4 minutes, concentrating on any previous episiotomy or scar tissue, which is especially non-elastic. You can also pull the perineum forward a bit when massaging, which mimics the action of the baby's head as it begins to emerge. After about one week, there will be a noticeable increase in flexibility and ability to stretch. Do this massage once a day, beginning around the 34th week of pregnancy (or earlier if necessary).

If your partner does the massage, he should use his two index fingers to press the perineum down and to the sides. After the burning sensation diminishes, he massages with index fingers, working his thumbs gently and firmly over any scar tissue. The massage action may be side-to-side using the two index fingers or the index and middle fingers of one hand, or he can massage by sweeping the index fingers in the opposite directions. Imagine the clitoris is at the 12 o'clock position with the woman semi-sitting; the massage would go from 6 o'clock to about 4 o'clock, then to 8 o'clock. Some women will find the motion of the fingers going in opposite directions to be more comfortable, while others will prefer the fingers to stretch the tissues in one direction at a time. Your partner needs to be flexible in working with your body. Be specific about your massage preferences. However, realize the whole purpose of doing prenatal perineal massage is to prepare your vagina and perineum for the stretching that is a normal part of birth, and it may be uncomfortable, especially in the beginning. As your perineum becomes more stretchy it will be less uncomfortable.

Soon, some women stretch enough so that their partners can massage with two fingers of each hand inside the vagina while the thumbs massage the outside. Other women are just becoming comfortable with the idea of the massage and one finger of each hand is enough at this time. Again, flexibility with one's partner is essential.

Perineal massage helps you get used to touch and pressure in a very sensitive and private area. During pushing, many mothers respond to the pressure and stretching sensations with tension and attempt to withhold the birth, rather than to give birth. The benefits of prenatal perineal massage appear to be a shorter second stage and fewer tears. Women who have done perineal massage faithfully do not report the stinging and burning sensations that are commonly associated with the stretching of the tissues as the baby's head emerges. Because the uncomfortable burning isn't present (or is less), they are more able to relax the pelvic floor and perineal muscles to allow the baby to slip out over an intact perineum.

If you have had active herpes during pregnancy, or you have a bacterial infection, you should not do the massage because of the potential for spreading the infection.

Kegel (pelvic floor) toning exercises after birth will tone up the muscles that birth and the massage have stretched. Prenatal Kegel exercises are beneficial since they familiarize you with your perineal area. You must be prepared to have a slow, controlled second stage. Panting or blowing to overcome the urge to push as the head emerges is essential to avoid tearing.

KEGEL (Pelvic Floor) EXERCISES

The pelvic floor is a set of muscles, which form a sling to support the internal organs which lie in the pelvis. The most important pelvic floor muscle runs from the pubic bone in the front to the coccyx (tailbone) in the back. It is shaped like a figure 8, with the urethra and vaginal openings forming one loop of the 8 and the anus the other loop. The same muscle controls all three openings; they cannot be controlled separately. Like any other muscle, it will become more functional with exercise.

When the pelvic floor is well toned, the pelvic organs are in their proper places and can function normally. When the pelvic floor sags, proper function is difficult because of the improper placement of the organs and poor muscle control. Symptoms of a sagging pelvic floor are stress incontinence (a leakage of urine when coughing, sneezing, laughing or lifting), constipation, prolapsed uterus (the womb slides down into or even out of the vagina), and poor sexual response to intercourse.

To find the pelvic floor muscles, tighten as if to stop the flow of urine. ***This may be done while actually urinating, but only to check progress as the alternate stopping and starting of the urine flow has been associated with bladder infections.*** Continue to tighten, getting the feel of the muscle. Contract it along its entire length, around the urethra, vagina and anus. Release. Do this 200 times per day. After a while, a week or two, the muscles will be stronger and the sensation of contraction will go deeper into the pelvis. Consciously contract as deeply as possible with each repetition of the exercise.

As the muscle gains in strength, contract it to a count of six, hold it for four counts, and then slowly release it to another count of six. A related exercise involves imagining that the pelvic floor is an elevator. Contract slowly at the vaginal opening (the 1st floor) then bring the contraction up the vaginal walls to the second, then third, then fourth floors. Relax the muscles slowly, in reverse order, then gently bear down, pushing the muscle out into the “basement”. Relax.

Do 200 Kegels each day until the pelvic floor is in very good condition. To check this, start and stop the flow of urine several times rapidly. When the flow is completely under control, the pelvic muscles are in good shape. Reduce the exercise repetitions to 50 each day. If control is lost, increase the number of exercises back up to 200 again until control is regained.

Kegeling is an exercise that can be done anywhere, anytime, in any position. No one else can tell that it is being done, and so it is very discreet. Set up personal routines for Kegeling. For example, do 10 whenever on the phone, while driving and stopped at red lights, when watching TV or bathing. Count Kegels in groups of 10, and do 20 groups each day. This way Kegeling will become a life long habit.