

Anal Sphincter Exercises for Women who have experienced a Third or a Fourth Degree Perineal Tear

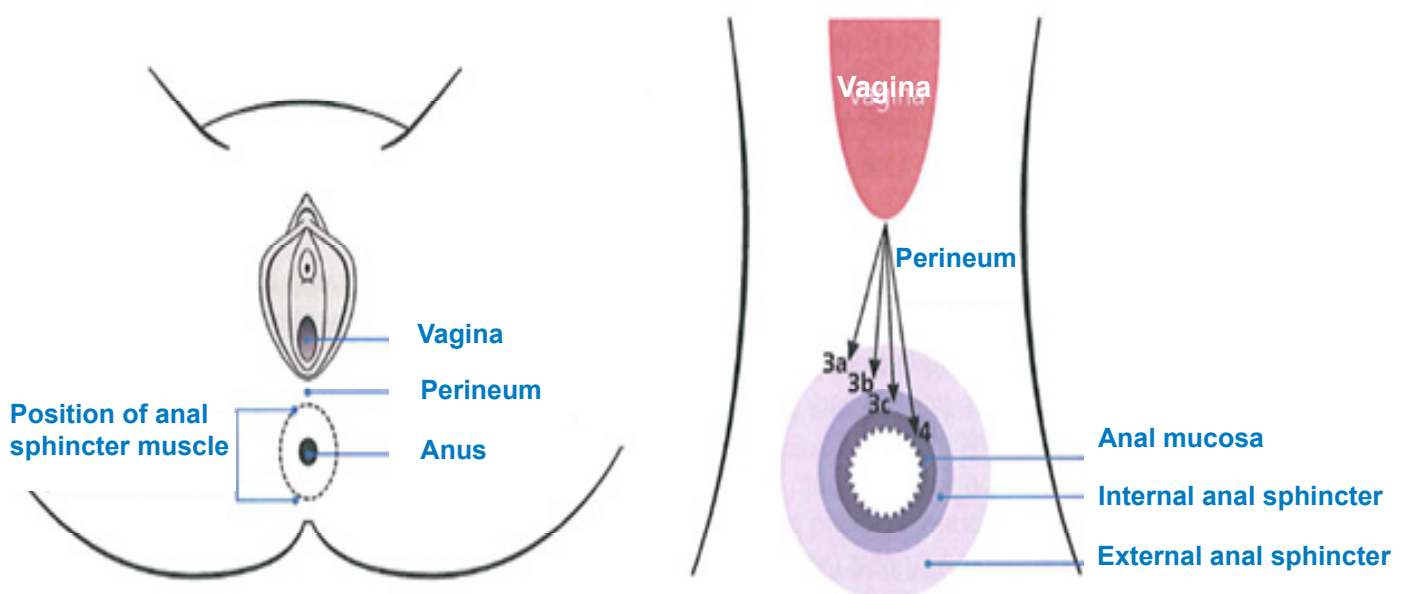
You have been given this factsheet because during the birth of your baby, you have experienced injury to your vagina and perineum. Your perineum is the area between your vagina and rectum (also referred to as your back passage). This injury has also involved the muscles around the rectum (the internal and external anal sphincter muscles) and may have involved the rectum itself.

A tear involving the external anal sphincter (EAS) muscle is known as a third degree tear. A tear involving the sphincter muscles and the rectum is known as a fourth degree tear (see diagram below).

Third degree tears are labelled according to the extent of the injury:

- 3a is a tear involving less than 50% of the EAS muscle
- 3b is a tear involving more than 50% of the EAS muscle
- 3c is a tear involving the whole of the EAS muscle and the internal anal sphincter muscle

A fourth degree is a tear involving the rectal mucosa (lining of the bowel).



The position of a third and fourth degree tear

It can be seen from the diagram that the back passage, or anus, has two rings of muscle around it. The inner ring is the internal anal sphincter muscle, which should be closed at all times, except when you are actually trying to open your bowels. Keeping this muscle closed is normally automatic; you don't have to think about doing it. This type of muscle which you do not have to think about using is known as an "involuntary" muscle.

The outer ring of muscle is the external anal sphincter muscle, which is a muscle you can tighten up consciously to close it more firmly if you have of bowel urgency (the need to rush to the toilet to have your bowels open) or if you have diarrhoea. This type of muscle, which you can control consciously, is known as a "voluntary" muscle.

Both these muscles wrap right around the anus. When a stool (poo) comes into the rectum, the internal sphincter muscle relaxes and allows the stool to enter the top part of the anus. Very sensitive nerves in the anal canal can tell if it is gas or stool waiting to come out. If it is stool, you can squeeze your anal sphincter to stop it from coming straight out before you are ready. This squeezing moves the stool back into the rectum where it waits until you get to the toilet.

Either or both of these sphincter muscles can become weak. This can be because of childbirth, constipation and straining to go to the toilet, or general wear and tear of these muscles. If you have weak muscles and cannot squeeze enough to be able to wait to go to the toilet, you will feel urgency and may leak gas, liquid or even solid stool.

How can exercises help?

Exercises can strengthen these muscles so that they once again give support. This will improve your bowel control and improve or stop leakage of gas or stool. Like any other muscle in the body, the more you use and exercise them, the stronger the sphincter muscles will be.

Learning to do the exercises

It is important to do the exercises in the right way, and to check from time to time that you are still doing them correctly.

Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Now imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from the bowel. To do this you must squeeze the muscle around the back passage. Try squeezing and lifting that muscle as tightly as you can, as if you are really worried that you are about to leak.

You should be able to feel the muscle move. Your buttocks, tummy and legs should not move at all. You should be aware of the skin around your back passage tightening and being pulled up and away from your chair. Really try to feel this.

You are now exercising your anal sphincter muscles. You should not need to hold your breath when you tighten these muscles.

Now imagine that the sphincter muscles are a lift. When you squeeze as tightly as you can your "lift" goes up to the fourth floor. But you cannot hold it there for very long and it will not get you safely to the toilet as it will get tired very quickly. So now squeeze more gently. Take your "lift" up to the second floor. Feel how much longer you can hold it than at maximum squeeze.

Practising your exercises

1. Sit stand or lie with your knees slightly apart.
Slowly tighten and pull up the sphincter muscles as tightly as you can.
Hold tightened for at least 5 seconds, then relax for about 4 seconds.

Repeat five times. This will work on the strength of your muscles.

2. Next, pull the muscles up to about half of their maximum squeeze.
See how long you can hold this for.
Then relax for at least 10 seconds.

Repeat twice. This will work on the endurance or staying power of your muscles.

3. Pull up the muscles as quickly and tightly as you can and then relax and then pull up again, and see how many times you can do this before you get tired.

Try for about 5 quick pull –ups.

Do these exercises – five as hard as you can; two as long as you can and five quick pull-ups – four to six times every day.

As the muscles get stronger, you will find that you can hold for longer than five seconds and that you can do more pull-ups each time without the muscle getting tired.

Remember it takes time for exercise to make muscle stronger. You may need to exercise regularly for several months before the muscles gain their full strength.

Tips to help you

- At first it is probably a good idea to set aside some time form these exercises and really concentrate on getting them right. Quite quickly however, they should become easy to do wherever you are. Nobody need know what you are doing!
- Get into the habit of doing your exercises with things you do regularly and often.
- If you are unsure that you are squeezing the right muscle, put a finger on the anus (the opening to your back passage) as you squeeze to check. You should feel a gentle lift and squeeze if you are exercising the right muscle. Alternatively look at the area in a mirror – you should see the anus pucker up as you squeeze it.
- Use your muscles when you need them – pull up the muscles if you feel urgency to go to the toilet and that you are about to leak. Remember that you cannot hold your tightest squeeze for very long, so you are better to use a gentler squeeze that you can hold for longer. Your control will gradually improve.
- Watch your weight – extra weight puts extra strain on your muscles. A healthy diet rich in fruit, vegetables and dietary fibre and plenty of fluids throughout the day will also help to prevent constipation and straining to pass a stool
- Once you have regained control of your bowel, don't forget your exercises. Continue to do them a few times a day to ensure that the problem does not come back.

Remember that you can do these exercises wherever you are – nobody need know what you are doing.!

Do you have any questions?

This information leaflet is designed to teach you how to exercise your anal sphincter muscles to improve your bowel control. If you have any problems doing the exercises, or if you do not understand any part of this information sheet, ask your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist for help.

Useful contact details :

Colorectal Nursing Department
Huddersfield Royal Infirmary
Lindley
Huddersfield
HD3 3EA
Tel: 01484 355062

If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :

Colorectal Specialist Nurse
Huddersfield Royal Infirmary
Telephone No: 01484 355062

www.cht.nhs.uk

If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.

Potřebujete-li tyto informace v jiném formátu nebo jazyce, obraťte se prosím na výše uvedené oddělení

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem tych informacji w innym formacie lub wersji językowej, prosimy skontaktować się z nami, korzystając z ww. danych kontaktowych

ਬ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਪ੍ਰਾਰੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿੱਚ ਲੈਣਾ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਉਪਰੋਕਤ ਵਿਭਾਗ ਵਿੱਚ ਸਾਡੇ ਨਾਲ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور فارمیٹ یا زبان میں درکار ہوں، تو برائے مہربانی مندرجہ بالا شعبے میں ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

"إذا احتجت الحصول على هذه المعلومة بشكل مغاير أو مترجمة إلى لغة مختلفة فيرجى منك الاتصال بالقسم المذكور أعلاه"