

Midwife's Guide to an Intact Perineum

An intact perineum is the goal of every birthing woman. We love to have whole, healthy female genitalia. Many people consider the health of the vagina/perineum to be a matter of chance, luck or being at the mercy of the circumstances of the forces that prevail at the time of the birth. Folklore abounds about doing perineal massage prenatally. No other species of mammal does this. Your tissues have been designed perfectly to give birth to your infant.

The intact perineum begins long before the day of the birth with good nutrition, but here is what you can expect during the second stage of delivery:

1. When you begin to feel like pushing it will be a bowel-movement-like feeling in your rectum. We will not rush this part. You will tune in to your body and do the least bearing down possible. This will allow your body to suffuse hormones to your perineum and make it very stretchy by the time the baby's head is stretching it.
2. Most women like pushing more than dilating. When you're pushing, you feel like you're getting somewhere and that there really is a purpose for your efforts.
3. The feeling in your rectum will increase until it feels like you are splitting in two and it's more than you can stand. This is normal and no one has ever split in two, so you won't be the first. Because you understand that this is normal, you will relax and find this an interesting and weird experience. You may have the thought, "Jan told me it would be like this and she was so right. I guess this has been going on since the beginning of humankind."
4. The next distinct feeling is a burning, pins-and-needles feeling at the opening of the vagina. Many women describe this as a "ring of fire" all around the vaginal opening. It is instinctive to slap your hand down on the now-bulging vulva and try to control where the baby's head is starting to emerge. *This instinct should be followed.* It seems to really help to have your own hands there. Sometimes women, if they aren't in the water, like to have very hot face cloths applied to their perineum at this point. If you like the feeling of this, say so, and if you don't, say so. We will do whatever you feel like.
5. This is a time of great concentration and focus for you. Extraneous conversation will be discouraged in the room unless you prefer it. Everyone will be silent and respectful in between sensations while you gather your focus. Once you begin feeling the ring of fire, there is no need for hurry. You will be guided to push as you feel like until the baby is crowning (the biggest part of the back top of the head is visible). All that will be touching your tissues is the hot face cloth (if not in the tub), your own hands and/or ours if you wish us to support your tissues. We may use a plastic mirror and a flashlight to see what's happening so we can guide you.
6. This point of full crowning is very intense and requires extreme focus on the burning—it is a safe, healthy feeling but unlike anything you have felt before. You may hear a devil woman inside your head who will say to you, "All you have to do is give one almighty push here and it will all be over—who cares if you tear? . . . just give it hell and get that forehead off your butt!" This devil woman is not your friend. Thank her for sharing and then have your better self say, "Just hang in there. It's OK.

Panting and rising above the pushing urge will help me stay together, and I will have less discomfort in the long run." Your practitioner will be giving only positive commands at this point, and she will be keeping them as simple as possible to maintain your focus. Typically the birth attendant's instructions are "Okay, Linda, easy . . . easy . . . slow and easy..... I know it burns..... burning is good, it means you're stretching. Just let it stretch. Good, that one's over. You're stretching beautifully; there's lots of space for your baby. This baby's the perfect size to come through."

7. You will be offered plain water with a bendable straw throughout this phase because hydration seems to be important when pushing, and you can take the water or leave it, as you wish.

8. Once the head is fully born, you will feel a great sense of relief. You will keep focused for the next sensation, which will bring the baby's shoulders out, and the baby's whole body will quickly emerge after that with very little effort on your part. The baby will be held near you for a moment as you both take a needed "pause" after this extreme effort, and then will go up onto your bare skin when you reach for him/her. It is the most ecstatic feeling in the world to have that slippery, crawling, amazing little baby with you on the outside of your body.

9. Your perineum may feel somewhat hot and tender in the first hour after birth, and believe it or not, the remedy that helps the most is to apply very hot, wet face cloths. This is in keeping with the Chinese medicine theory that cold should never be applied to new mothers or babies. Women report that they feel instantly more comfortable when heat is applied, and any swelling diminishes rapidly. Other options may be used too.

10. When the placenta is coming, you will feel a sensation of fullness in your birth canal. Let me know when you are contracting; I will gently guide your placenta out as you push. The feeling is like pushing out a large jello mold – no bones, all soft, just plopping out. It is a good feeling to complete the entire process of birth with the emergence of the placenta.

Original by Gloria Lemay, with modifications from Jan