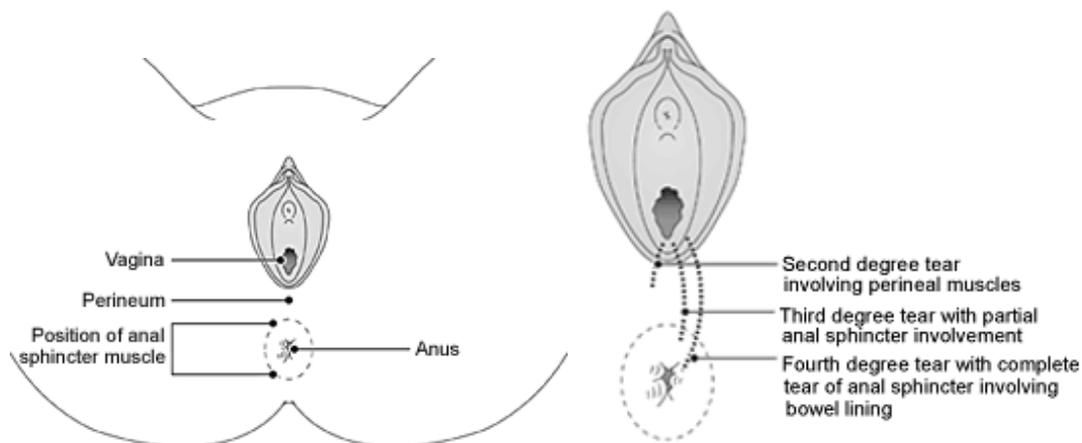


## Your important health information

# Physiotherapy after 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> degree tear

## What is a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> degree tear?

A third or fourth degree tear during childbirth involves the perineum and pelvic floor muscles including the anal sphincter muscle. (See picture). The perineum is the area of skin between the vagina and anus. The pelvic floor is a group of muscles that help to support your pelvic organs and assist with bladder and bowel control. The anal sphincter muscle is a circular muscle around the anus (back passage). These tears are often unpredictable and occur in only three in one hundred women having a vaginal birth.



## What symptoms may I experience after a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> degree tear?

After having any tear or episiotomy it is common to feel pain or soreness around the stitches for two to four weeks after giving birth, particularly when sitting or walking. Some women feel that they must rush to the toilet to empty their bowels urgently and pass wind more easily. You may also have difficulty holding onto and controlling bowel motions (bowel incontinence). Some women also experience pain with sexual intercourse. Most women make a good recovery and 6-8 in 10 women will have no symptoms a year after birth.

## What can I do to help my recovery?

### 1. Reduce pain and inflammation

- **Rest:** Lie down on your back, side or front for two hours during the day for the first two weeks after birth and one hour during the day from two to eight weeks.
- **Ice:** Apply an ice pack, wrapped in gauze or face towel, to the perineum for 20 minutes every two to four hours for the first 72 hours after birth.
- Do not put ice directly against the skin.
- **Compression:** Wear firm supportive underwear for the first 6 weeks.
- Take **pain relief** medication regularly as prescribed by your doctor. Avoid pain relief medication with codeine and **DO NOT** take any medication via the back passage.
- Continue to take your pain relief medication when you go home.
- Looking after a baby and recovering from a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> degree tear can be hard.

**Support from family and friends can help.**

## 2. Commence strengthening your pelvic floor muscles

- Gentle pelvic floor exercises can assist with reducing swelling and begin strengthening the injured muscles.
- Start **pelvic floor muscle exercises** 48 hours after birth in a comfortable horizontal position.
- Gently squeeze and tighten around your back passage and vagina, lifting and drawing forwards and upwards. Keep breathing normally and ensure your legs and buttocks are relaxed.
- Try to hold for three seconds, rest for six seconds and repeat three times.
- This is one set. Repeat this set four times each day.

As you improve, progress these exercises by increasing the length of the hold and the number of repetitions you do. Relaxing the muscle is important too. You should feel a distinct feeling of 'letting go' of the muscle each time. Aim to build up to a 10 second hold, repeating 10 times in a row, three times each day.

Attend your physiotherapy appointments after birth to ensure you pelvic floor muscles make a good recovery and you can manage or prevent any symptoms occurring

## 3. Avoid straining the recovering area

- Most of the stitches dissolve in a few weeks but the deeper stitches take three to four months to dissolve. Be aware that the healing and muscle recovery takes time.

### Avoid constipation and straining on the toilet

- Prevent constipation by **drinking** at least two litres of fluid daily (water is best). Minimise caffeine intake (tea/coffee) to none or one caffeinated drink per day. Caffeine can also cause bowel urgency.
- Aim to keep your bowel motions formed, soft and easy to pass for the next 6-12 weeks.
- Eat a **high fibre diet** (fruit, vegetables, wholemeal bread, seeds and grains).
- If you have been prescribed medications to help your bowel motions become soft (for example lactulose syrup or psyllium husk) continue to take this when you go home.

**Avoid straining** during your bowel motion. Adopt a good position on the toilet  
(See picture)

- Place your feet on a small stool so your knees are higher than your hips
- Lean forward with a straight back
- Rest your arms on your thighs
- To empty, relax your abdominals and bulge your tummy out. It can help to support your perineum with your clean hand as you empty your bowels.



### Avoid heavy lifting

- Try to minimise lifting anything heavier than your baby for the first 6 weeks after birth. Avoid heavy housework that requires pushing, pulling, scrubbing and lifting

### Avoid high-impact and high-intensity exercises

- Avoid returning to running, jumping, skipping and lifting weights at the gym. Avoid sit ups and strong abdominal exercises for the first three to six months after birth. Your physiotherapist can advise you on appropriate exercises for your stage of recovery. Commence short walks and build up the time. Walking should not make your perineum ache. If it does, rest and try a shorter walk the next day.

## 4. Attend your follow-up appointments

### 4.1. Physiotherapy follow-up

You will receive a letter notifying you of your **physiotherapy** appointments commencing between 6 to 8 weeks after the birth of your baby. It is important to attend these appointments even if you are not having any problems to ensure a full recovery. Your physiotherapist will work with you to help you strengthen your pelvic floor muscles and return to your desired activities.

Please call your physiotherapist if you have any questions before your appointment. We also suggest you attend a physiotherapy postnatal class:

<b>Mercy Hospital for Women Heidelberg</b>	<b>Physiotherapy Postnatal Class</b> <b>When:</b> Monday, Wednesday and Friday 9:30am-10:30am (excluding public holidays) <b>Where:</b> Level three, Seminar room two
<b>Werribee Mercy Hospital</b>	<b>Physiotherapy Postnatal Class</b> <b>When:</b> Monday – Friday 10:00am-11:00am <b>Where:</b> Maternity Unit Lounge (opposite rooms 21-24) Maternity Ward

### 4.2. Medical specialist follow-up

You should see your general practitioner (GP) 6 weeks after birth.

You will receive a letter notifying you of an appointment to see an **obstetrician gynaecologist** at 12 weeks after birth to check that the stitches have healed properly and check if you are having any problems with pain or the control of your wind or bowel motions. You will also have the opportunity to discuss the birth and any concerns you may have.

You may be referred for ongoing care by a team of specialists in the **Perineal Clinic** if you have ongoing problems.

You will also be able to discuss your options for future births at your follow-up appointment or early in your next pregnancy. Your individual circumstances and preferences will be taken into account.

If you have any concerns before your follow-up appointments please contact your general practitioner (GP) or present to the Emergency Department.

#### Further Information

If you have any questions regarding this information, please contact:

#### Physiotherapy Department

**Mercy Hospital for Women** Phone: 03 8458 4141

**Werribee Mercy Hospital** Phone: 03 8754 3150

#### Acknowledgements

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