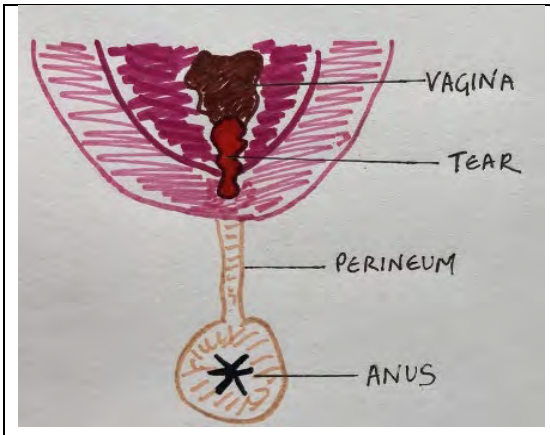
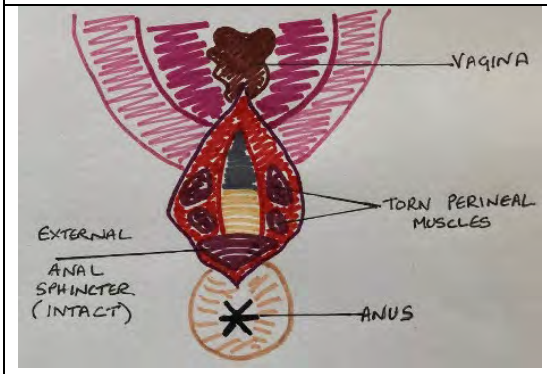
Exercises following obstetric anal sphincter injuries (OASI – third or fourth degree perineal tears)

This leaflet gives advice, including exercises, in order to help you heal well from perineal tears following childbirth.

What is a third or fourth degree perineal tear?

The perineum is the area between the vaginal opening and the anus (back passage). During childbirth, perineal tearing may occur. There are four types of tear depending on how deep the tear is.

Perineal tear types

	**First (1st) degree:** This is a small tear, which just involves the skin, and does not involve any muscles. You will not normally need stitches to repair it.
	**Second (2nd) degree:** This is a larger tear, which goes through the skin and into the muscles of the perineum. It is the most common type of tear and you will sometimes need stitches to repair it.

Third and fourth degree tears also involve the external anal sphincter muscle or EAS. These tears can take a long time to heal.

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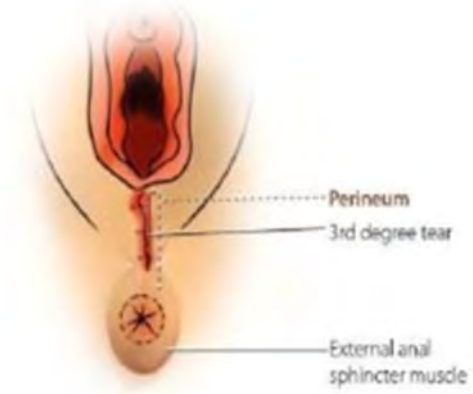
<td> 
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<td>Third (3rd) degree:
This tear extends all the way from the vagina to the anus, and involves the muscle surrounding the anus (the EAS). There are 3 grades of 3rd degree tear:
3a = less than half of the sphincter is torn
3b = more than half of the sphincter is torn
3c = the internal sphincter is also torn.
It will be repaired in the operating theatre, and you will need physiotherapy exercises for the sphincter muscle.</td>
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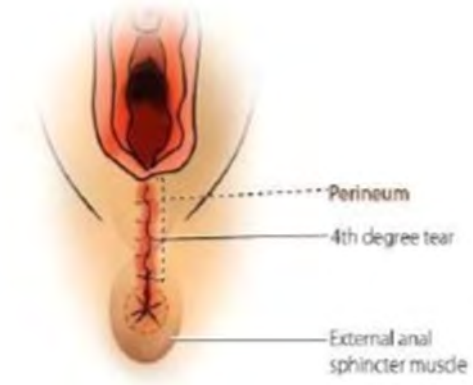
<td> 
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<td>Fourth (4th) degree:
This tear goes all the way through both the external and internal sphincter muscles and into the layers of skin inside your rectum (back passage). It will be repaired in the operating theatre, and you will need physiotherapy exercises for the sphincter muscle.</td>
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What treatments are offered after OASI repair?

1. **Antibiotics:** You may be offered a course of antibiotics to minimise the risk of infection. The chance of infection is higher because the stitches are close to your anus.
2. **Pain relieving drugs:** You will be offered painkillers, such as paracetamol and ibuprofen, which are safe to take after delivery and while you are breastfeeding.
3. **Laxatives:** Laxatives are offered to make it easier to open your bowels after the repair.
4. **Physiotherapy:** You should be seen by the physiotherapist before you leave hospital. If you are discharged home over the weekend, you will be sent an appointment to see the physiotherapist as an outpatient.

Tips to speed up healing of your tear

It takes about 6-12 weeks for your stitches to heal well after delivery. The stitches start to dissolve from two weeks onwards. Try following these tips to help with your healing:

- **Keep the area clean:** Have a shower or bath every day and change sanitary or maternity pads regularly. Dry yourself well (gently pat dry) after washing. This will prevent infection of the wound. Always wash your hands before and after going to the toilet. Wear cotton or disposable knickers and avoid tight clothing.
- **To help with discomfort:** Apply ice wrapped in a cloth or flannel to the area for up to 10 minutes a few times a day. This will help to reduce swelling and pain. A good way to make an ice pack is to make a clean maternity pad wet, then freeze it, you can then place this between two pairs of knickers (so that it is not directly touching your skin). Take painkillers

regularly if you need to. Pouring body temperature water over the perineum during and after passing urine may help you with the stinging sensation.

- **Fluids:** Drink plenty of fluids – up to 3 litres a day and eat a healthy balanced diet with plenty of fibre, vegetables and fruits. This will help prevent any constipation.
- **Going to the toilet:** A relaxed position on the toilet can help with your bowel movements. When going to the toilet, place a clean sanitary pad against the perineum to support it, so that you do not strain on the stitches. Keep your poo soft to help you avoid straining, for example by making sure your diet is high in fibre, fruits and vegetables, and you are drinking plenty of fluids. Always wipe front to back to avoid contaminating the wound with bacteria from the anus. Use plain water to wash the perineum.
- **Avoid standing or sitting too long:** Try lying on your side to take the pressure off the stitches. You could also use a doughnut or gel cushion to help relieve pressure if it is painful to sit.
- **Start your pelvic floor exercises** once your urinary catheter has been removed and after you have passed urine normally. This will help with improving the blood flow to the perineum and strengthening the pelvic floor muscles. These may be weaker due to your pregnancy and the delivery, especially with the tear.

What are the long-term effects of OASI?

Most women make a good recovery following their tear particularly if it is recognised and repaired straight after the birth. It can take between 6-weeks to 12-months for your stitches to heal completely.

During the recovery period, some women can experience the following complications:

1. Pain or soreness in the perineum.
2. A feeling of urgently needing to open your bowels.
3. Fear about resuming sex. You can resume vaginal intercourse once the stitches are completely healed, provided you feel ready.

Problem signs to look out for

Contact your midwife or GP if you develop any of the following:

1. Increasing pain near your stitches or an offensive smelling discharge. This could be sign of infection.
2. Difficulty controlling wind or bowels.
3. You have any worries or concerns.

Anal sphincter muscles strengthening exercises

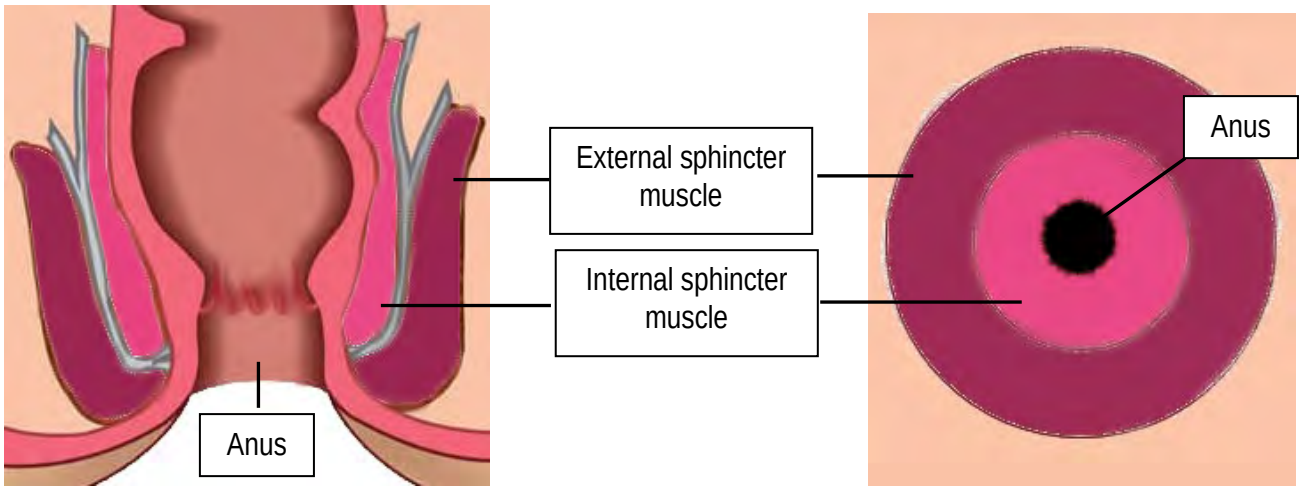
What are the anal sphincter muscles?

The back passage or anus has two rings of muscles (see Fig 1):

1. Internal anal sphincter muscles: The inner ring of muscles works all the time to keep the stool in, and relaxes when you open your bowels. You do not control it and it cannot be exercised.

2. External anal sphincter muscles: The outer ring of muscles. This is the voluntary muscle that you squeeze to prevent diarrhoea or wind from coming out. This muscle can be exercised and strengthened.

Anal sphincter anatomy (cross section)



What do sphincter muscles do?

The sphincter muscles wrap around the anus. When stool enters the rectum, the internal sphincter muscle relaxes and allows the stool to enter the top part of anus.

Very sensitive nerves in the anal canal tell you if it is gas or stool (poo) waiting to come out.

If it is stool, you squeeze the external anal sphincter muscle to stop it from coming out. This squeeze pushes the stool into the rectum where it waits until you can get to the toilet.

If the external anal sphincter muscles are weak, people experience a sensation of urgency and can sometimes have bowel incontinence if they cannot get to the toilet in time. The weak muscle cannot squeeze hard enough to stop the stool from coming out.

How to strengthen the external anal sphincter muscles:

External anal sphincter muscle exercises

- **Step 1.** Lie down with your knees bent and apart or sit comfortably in a chair with feet apart.
- **Step 2.** Locate your sphincter muscles. Concentrate on where your anal sphincter muscles are positioned around the anal opening. Now squeeze the muscles around your anal opening as if you are stopping yourself from passing wind. Squeeze and lift these muscles as hard as you can. It is important to breathe normally and not to hold your breath. Also, make sure you are not tightening the buttocks (bottom cheeks) or tummy muscles.

Practice the following three types of exercise:

1. **Slow exercises:** Squeeze and tighten your anal sphincter muscle as tight as you can. Hold for as long as you can (up to 10 seconds). Then release the muscle and rest for few seconds. Repeat 10 times.
2. **Fast exercises:** Squeeze and tighten your sphincter muscle as hard and as fast as you can, then release. Repeat 10-20 times.

3. **Sub-maximal contractions:** Squeeze your sphincter muscle just a little bit - around half of the maximum squeeze. Hold this as long as you can (20-30 seconds). Repeat 2-3 times.

How often to do the sphincter exercises in a day

Do the above three types of exercises 3-5 times a day. Your eventual aim is to be doing 10 long steady holds up to 10-seconds, up to 20 short and fast contractions and three 30-second sub-maximal contractions.

Tighten the sphincter muscle when you have the feeling of urgency or if you are worried there is going to be leakage before getting to the toilet.

It takes at least 3 months to build up the strength in your muscles. Therefore, we recommend that you continue your anal sphincter strengthening exercises for at least three months, in order to strengthen your muscles.

If you have no problems now, but develop problems in the future

If you have problems controlling either your bladder or bowels, you can ask your GP for a referral to pelvic health and maternity physiotherapy/referral to gynaecologists.

Helpful websites

- https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/patients/tears/tears-childbirth/
- https://pogp.csp.org.uk/ .

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

J Churches (RBFT Pelvic Health and Maternity Physiotherapy), January 2021
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