

Exercises following Obstetric Anal Sphincter Injuries (OASI – third or fourth degree perineal tears)

What is third/fourth degree perineal tear?

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

- **First (1st) degree:** Small skin tear which does not require stitches.
- **Second (2nd) degree:** This affects the skin and muscles of the perineum and requires stitches to repair it.
- **Third (3rd) degree:** Deeper tear extending from vaginal wall to the anus (affecting the anal sphincter muscles).
- **Fourth (4th) degree:** Deeper tear into the anus and rectum.

Third and fourth degree tears are repaired in the operating theatre under spinal anaesthetic.

What treatments are offered after OASI repair?

1. **Antibiotics:** You would 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 would 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 would be seen by the physiotherapist before you leave hospital. If you are discharged home over the weekend, you would 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 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 the sanitary pads regularly. Dry yourself well (gently pat dry) after washing. This will prevent infection of the wound. Always wash the 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 30 minutes a few times a day. This will help to reduce swelling and pain. 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 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 sanitary pad against the perineum which helps you not to put much strain on the stitches. Try not to strain when going to the toilet and eat a healthy diet (as above) to minimise any constipation. 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 of the stitches.
- **Start your pelvic floor exercises** after your urinary catheter is removed and after you have passed urine normally. This will help with improving the blood flow to the perineum and helps to strengthen 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 normally takes between 6 weeks to 12 months for your stitches to heal well after the repair.

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 after six weeks when the stitches have healed well and when you feel ready to resume intercourse.

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 to control wind or bowels.
3. You have any worries or concerns.

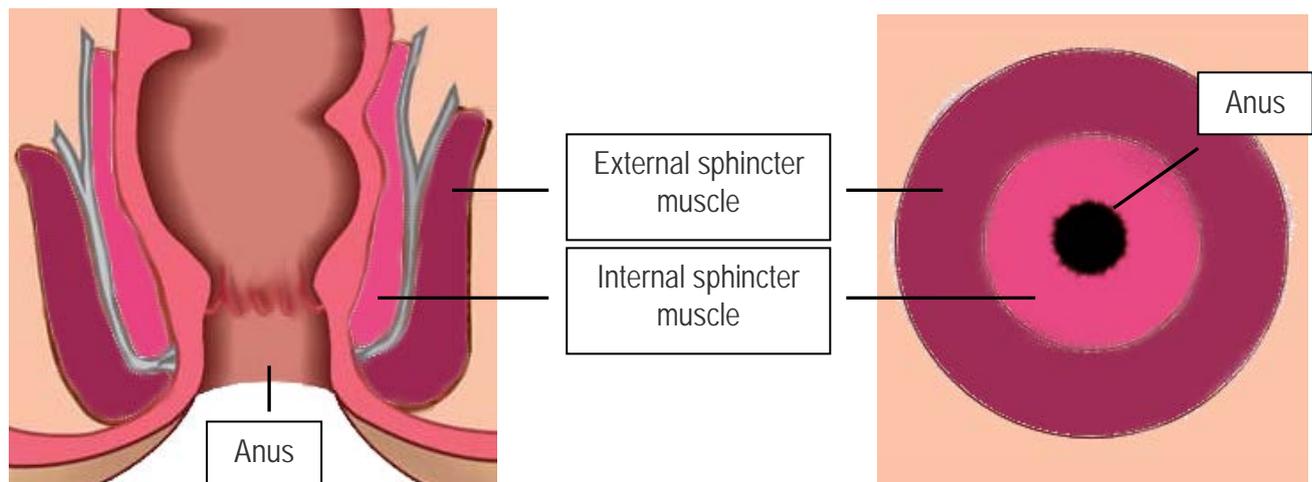
Anal sphincter muscles strengthening exercises

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. It works all the time to keep the stools in and relaxes when opening 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 which you squeeze to control yourself when you have diarrhoea. 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 a stool enters the rectum, the internal sphincter muscles relax and allow the stool to enter the top part of anus.

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

If it is stool, you squeeze the external anal sphincter muscles 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 anus. Now try and squeeze the muscles around anus as if you are stopping yourself from passing wind. Try to squeeze and lift these muscles as hard as you can. It is important to breathe normally and not to hold on to the breath. Also make sure you are not tightening the buttock/tummy muscles.

Practice the following three types of exercise:

1. **Slow exercises:** Squeeze and tighten your anal sphincter muscles as tight as you can. Hold for as long as you can (up to 10 seconds). Then slowly release the muscle and rest for few seconds. Repeat as many as you can (up to 10 times).
2. **Fast exercises:** Squeeze and lift your sphincter muscles hard and as fast as you can. Slowly release. Repeat as much as you can (up to 10 times).

3. **Sub-maximal contractions:** Try and squeeze your sphincter muscles up to half of their 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

Try and 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, 10 short and fast contractions and three sub-maximal contractions.

Try tightening the sphincter muscles when you have the feeling of urgency or if you are worried if there is going to be a leakage before getting to the toilet.

It takes 6-12 weeks to build up the strength in your muscles. Therefore, it is recommended to continue your anal sphincter strengthening exercise for three months in order to strengthen your muscles.

Helpful websites

<https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/patients/tears/tears-childbirth/>

<https://pogp.csp.org.uk/>

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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