

How will this affect me in the future?

Most women find their tear heals well and does not give them any problems in the longer term.

A small proportion of women who have experienced a 3rd or 4th degree tear during childbirth go on to have longer-term problems. Some women find that they become incontinent of flatus (inability to control 'passing wind') and around 5% of women who have suffered this type of tear find that they become incontinent of faeces (leaking of bowel motions).

If you have any problems such as leaking from your back passage, an offensive vaginal discharge or any other concerns after going home, please inform your midwife, Physiotherapist or GP as you may need to be seen sooner than the 4 month appointment.

If you are thinking of having more children the doctor in the specialist clinic will discuss with you your options for future births. Providing your tear heals well you may be advised that it would be fine to have another vaginal birth, however if you choose this option there is always the risk that you could have a further third or fourth degree tear. In order to prevent further damage to their pelvic floor, women who have had problems after their tear, such as leaking from their back passage, may choose that their future babies will be born by caesarean section.



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Information for Women who have experienced a 3rd or 4th Degree Perineal Tear

This leaflet will explain to you about the tear you have experienced while your baby was being born. It also gives information on how to care for yourself and your stitches while they heal.

Please ask if you have any questions, we are here to help you feel as well as possible after the birth of your baby.

Useful telephone contacts:

Obstetric Assessment unit
☎ 20744658

Women's Health Physiotherapist
☎ 20742481 (with answer phone)

It is very common for women to need stitches after their baby is born. The type of tear experienced by women varies. Some women experience tearing of the skin only or of the muscles just underneath the skin. These are known as 1st and 2nd degree tears. The type of tear you have experienced is known as a 3rd or 4th degree tear which is more complicated and can sometimes be troublesome for women in the longer term.

What is a third or fourth degree tear?

A third degree tear is a tear that involves the skin of your vaginal and perineum and the muscles of your pelvic floor, including part of the circle of muscle that surrounds your anus (back passage). This muscle is known as the anal sphincter.

A fourth degree tear involves the skin of your vagina and perineum, and the muscles of your pelvic floor. The tear includes the circle of muscle that surrounds your anus (back passage) and the lining of the back-passage.

How common is this tear?

Around one in one hundred women who have a vaginal birth will experience this type of tear.

Why does it happen?

A 3rd or 4th degree tear can happen with any form of vaginal birth, even if things seemed to be very straight forward. It is not possible to know which women will have a 3rd or 4th degree tear and there is little that can usually be done to avoid it.

There are some factors that are known to increase the chances of a woman having a 3rd or 4th degree tear. For example these types of tear are more likely to happen if a woman is giving birth to a large baby (more than 9 pounds), being assisted to give birth with obstetric forceps or has an episiotomy during the birth.

How was the tear repaired?

An experienced doctor would have repaired your tear in theatre. You would have been given antibiotics during the repair procedure.

As repair of a 3rd or 4th degree tear is complex the repair may have taken anything between 30 to 60 minutes.

Care of your stitches

We advise all women who have had stitches to try and keep their stitches clean and dry until they have healed.

Remember to change your pads regularly. Have a fresh pad each time you visit the toilet.

Bath or shower at least daily, you do not need to worry about getting your stitches wet but remember to pat them dry after you have washed.

We would not suggest that you add salt to your bath, as this will dry out your skin but not really help your stitches to heal.

Care in hospital before you go home.

In order for your stitches to heal as easily as possible you will be offered some extra care while you are still in hospital:

Until your stitches are fully healed it is important not to get constipated and you need to try and keep your motions soft. For this reason you will be prescribed laxatives for ten days.

To reduce the chance of developing an infection in your stitches you will also be prescribed antibiotics for a week along with prescribed pain relief, please ask if you feel what you have been prescribed is not helping with your discomfort.

A Physiotherapist will see you during your stay in hospital and you will also be sent an out-patient appointment regarding education, assessment and pelvic floor exercises to aid your recovery.

Providing you and your baby are well you will be able to go home once you have had your bowels opened.

Following Discharge home

As we would like to check that your tear is not giving you any problems, you will also be given an appointment to come for a 1:1 assessment at 10-12 weeks post natal performed by the Women's Health Physiotherapy team. Following this, if you are asymptomatic, you will then be discharged from care.