



3rd or 4th Degree Tears after vaginal delivery: A guide for patients and carers

What is a 3rd degree tear?

This is a tear between the vagina and the anal canal (back passage) involving the muscles that surround the anus known as the anal sphincter. There are two rings of muscle surrounding the anal canal - the inner ring (known as the internal sphincter) and the outer ring (known as the external sphincter). Both these muscles are actively involved in the control of your stools and wind from your back passage. Damage to these muscles can be graded according to the depth of injury (3a = partial thickness external sphincter torn, 3b = full thickness external sphincter torn and 3c = internal sphincter torn). A 4th degree tear is a tear that also involves the skin (mucosa) lining the anal canal.

How common are 3rd degree tears?

3rd or 4th degree tears occur in less than 5% of women following vaginal delivery. Sometimes it may be difficult to identify the full extent of these tears and, therefore, when it is suspected you may need to be taken to the operating theatre to be examined under an anaesthetic.

What happens if you sustain a 3rd or 4th degree tear?

If your midwife suspects that you may have sustained a 3rd or 4th degree tear, she will inform the Specialist Registrar. The Registrar will then arrange for you to have the repair done in the operating theatre under spinal analgesia, if you do not already have an epidural. The advantage of doing this in the operating theatre is that there is a good light source, appropriate surgical instruments and the repair is performed under sterile conditions. There may be a delay in performing your repair if the doctor or labour ward is busy. Depending on the extent of the tear it may take up to an hour or more to suture the tears. As an epidural or spinal analgesic may make you temporarily lose your bladder sensation, a catheter will be inserted in your bladder to keep it empty for about 24 hours.

Management following repair

Antibiotics will be commenced during the repair and you will be asked to continue taking it for three days to minimise the risk of infection. You will be given pain killers to take if there is any discomfort. It is important that you avoid getting constipated after the operation as it may cause the repair to breakdown during

straining. Therefore, you will be given a stool softener (Lactulose 15 mls twice daily) for 10 days. You can increase this three times a day or even reduce it if your stools are soft and you are able to achieve this without too much straining. Drink plenty of fluids (approximately 2 litres daily) and eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Follow-up

In the postnatal ward you will be given a questionnaire regarding your bowel and bladder function before the delivery. You should complete this and give it back to the Doctor or Midwife before you go home. When you go home you will be sent an appointment for approximately 8 to 12 weeks after delivery to attend the Perineal Clinic which is a consultant led clinic run by Miss Raneer Thakar and Mr. Abdul Sultan at the Lancaster Suite in Croydon University Hospital. You will then have a scan of the muscles of the back passage and anal pressure measurements to see how well the torn muscles have recovered. For some women, 3rd or 4th degree tears can lead to some loss of bowel control (incontinence) that can occur at any time after delivery. It is, therefore, essential that you attend this clinic appointment so that you can be evaluated fully.

Management of future pregnancies

Based on the results of the tests that you would have when you attend the Perineal Clinic, you will be given advice about the best way to deliver your next baby. You will also need to be seen in the perineal clinic for reassessment during any future pregnancies. You should still keep your appointment in the perineal clinic even if you do not wish to have any more children.

Data protection

During your visit you will be asked for some personal details. This is kept confidential and used to plan your care. It will only be used by staff that needs to see it because they are involved in your care and we may send details of your treatment to your GP with your consent.

Information about you may be used for audit purposes and shared within the NHS. Your consent is required for this and you have a legal right to refuse. If you wish to exercise your legal right to have access to all information held about you by the Trust or you would like to talk to someone about Data Protection, please contact the Data Protection Officer on (020) 8401 3475

Useful contact numbers

Miss Thakar's secretary	(020) 8401 3154
Mr Sultan's secretary	(020) 8401 3161
Antenatal Clinic	(020) 8401 3459
Lancaster Suite	(020) 8401 3647