

Obstetric Perineal Lacerations

Fourth-Degree Laceration

What is a fourth-degree laceration?

A fourth-degree laceration is the least common tear. This tear extends from the first layer of the vagina into the muscles of the vagina, through the muscles of the anal sphincter (a muscle that controls bowel movements), and into the rectum. A woman is at risk for a fourth-degree tear during her first vaginal delivery, if she delivered her baby in the face-up position, had a vacuum or forceps delivery, had an episiotomy (a cut into the vagina and at the time of delivery), her baby weighed more than 8 pounds, or if she is of Asian ethnicity. Most women recover well on their own, but some need additional help.

How do I take care of my stitches and bottom?

You will have stitches in the vagina and perineum to close this tear. These stitches should dissolve on their own within 6 weeks. You may want to use a small squirt bottle (a “peri-bottle”) of water when you urinate or have a bowel movement to keep the area clean until the tear and stitches are healed. Ice packs, as well as medicated pads and sprays for discomfort can also be helpful; please use them according to package instructions. It is also important to stay hydrated and to take stool softeners to keep your bowels soft while your bottom is healing. Some common stool softeners available at pharmacies are docusate, milk of magnesia, and polyethylene glycol (MiraLax®). Resting your bottom in a warm bath of water for 10 minutes at a time (a “Sitz bath”) two to three times per day can also help.

What can happen after a fourth-degree tear?

Most women heal well. One in five women may experience a wound infection during early healing. Long-term, women also can experience vaginal pain, pain with sexual intercourse, or pain with bowel movements. Some women also may have difficulty controlling gas or bowel movements. Signs that the wound may be infected include if you have pain that is not controlled with medication and the wound care instructions listed here, notice a foul-smelling discharge, or have a fever (temperature more than 100.3° F). If you notice these symptoms, please contact your Ob/Gyn for advice. Additionally, you will likely be referred to the Cleveland Clinic’s Postpartum Care Clinic to help promote healthy healing of your bottom.

What happens with the next baby?

Women who have a fourth-degree laceration can have a vaginal birth with their next pregnancy. They do have a higher risk of having a third or fourth-degree laceration with their next baby – about 6%. Because this risk is considered low, a repeat vaginal delivery is generally recommended for any subsequent pregnancies. Under certain circumstances, your Ob/Gyn provider may offer you a Caesarean section for delivery in your next pregnancy to prevent this tear from happening again. Please make sure you speak to her or him at your next visit.

