

Midwife's Guide to Intact Perineum

by Gloria Lemay

1. Physiologic Pushing: When you begin to feel like pushing it will be like a bowel-movement or pressure on your bum. We will not rush this part. You will tune in to your body and do the least bearing down possible. This will allow your body to suffuse hormones to your perineum and make it very stretchy by the time the baby's head is stretching it.

2. The feeling in your bum will increase and you may feel like having a bowel movement. You have been educated that this is normal, you will relax and find this an interesting and weird experience. You may have the thought, "My Doula told me it would be like this and she was so right. I guess this has been going on since the beginning of humankind."

3. The next distinct feeling is a burning, pins-and-needles feeling at the opening of the vagina. Many women describe this as a "ring of fire" all around the vaginal opening. It is instinctive to slap your hand down on the vulva and try to control where the baby's head is starting to emerge. This instinct should be followed. It seems to really help to have your own hands there. Sometimes women like to have very hot face cloths applied to their perineum at this point. If you like the feeling of this, say so, and if you don't, say so. We will do whatever you feel like.

4. Most women like pushing more than dilating. When you're pushing, you feel like you're getting somewhere and that there really is a goal for your efforts.

5. This is a time of great concentration and focus for you. Extraneous conversation will not be allowed in the room. Everyone will be silent and respectful in between sensations while you re-gather your focus. Once you begin feeling the ring of fire, there is no need for hurry. You will be guided to push as you feel like until the baby is crowning (the biggest part of the back top of the head is visible). All that will be touching your tissues is the hot face cloth and your own hands. It is important for the practitioner to keep their hands off because the blood-filled tissues can be easily bruised and weakened by poking, external fingers. This can lead to tearing. We will use a plastic mirror and a flashlight to see what's happening so we can guide you. We won't touch you or the baby.

6. This point of full crowning is intense and requires extreme focus on the burning—it is a safe, healthy feeling but unlike anything you have felt before. "Just hang in there. It's OK. Panting and rising above the pushing urge will help me stay together, and I will have less discomfort in the long run." Your practitioner will be giving only positive commands at this point, and she will be keeping them as simple as possible to maintain your focus. Typically the birth attendant's instructions are "Okay, Linda, easy . . . easy . . . easy . . . pant . . . pant with me . . . Hah . . . Hah . . . Hah . . . Hah . . . Hah . . . Hah . . . Hah. Good, that one's over. You're stretching beautifully; there's lots of space for your baby. This baby's the perfect size to come through."

7. You will be offered plain water with a bendable straw throughout this phase because hydration seems to be important when pushing, and you can take the water or leave it, as you wish.

8. Once the head is fully born, you will feel a great sense of relief. You will keep focused for the next sensation, which will bring the baby's shoulders out, and the baby's whole body will quickly emerge after that with very little effort on your part. The baby will go up onto your bare skin immediately, and it is the most ecstatic feeling in the world to have that slippery, crawling, amazing little baby with you on the outside of your body. Your perineum may feel somewhat hot and tender in the first hour after birth, and believe it or not, the remedy that helps the most is to apply very hot, wet face cloths. This is in keeping with the Chinese medicine theory that cold should never be applied to new mothers or babies. Women report that they feel instantly more comfortable when heat is applied, and any swelling diminishes rapidly.

9. When you push your placenta out, the feeling will be like that of a large, soft tampon just plopping out. It is a good feeling to complete the entire process of birth with the emergence of the placenta.