

Vaginal Fistula

Objectives:

Students will learn:

- What is and what causes vaginal fistula
- How it can be prevented
- Treatment
- Complications

Expected Behaviours:

- Avoid early pregnancy
- Have a skilled birth attendant (such as a doctor or midwife) at all deliveries (child births)
- Have a contingency plan in case complications arise
- Seek emergency medical care if labour complications occur and encourage friends and family to do the same (such as; prolonged or obstructed labour)

Information:

Overview and Definition:

A vaginal fistula is a hole between a woman's vagina and another organ; usually the urethra (where urine comes out of the body) or rectum (where faeces exits the body). The hole is usually formed during childbirth as a result of prolonged and obstructed labour. In these cases, the baby's head becomes stuck in the birth canal and presses against the delicate tissues inside the mother's body, cutting off the blood supply for long periods of time. When the tissue does not receive proper blood supply it can die and disintegrate, which causes a hole to form between the vagina and bladder or urethra (vesicovaginal fistula), or the vagina and rectum (rectovaginal fistula). This hole then causes the woman to leak urine or faeces out of her vagina without control.

Vaginal fistula may also be formed through sexual violence. Injuries from rape (whether by person or object) can cause this hole to form, which is referred to as traumatic fistula.

Risk Factors:

Things that increase the risk of developing a vaginal fistula include:

- No skilled birth attendant, such as a doctor or midwife, present during labour and delivery
- No access to emergency medical care when complications arise during childbirth (approximately 15% of all pregnancies require emergency medical attention)
- Poverty and malnutrition, which causes stunting of skeletal growth; meaning a girl's pelvis does not fully mature and causes obstructed birth later in life
- Giving birth at a young age (before 18 years)

Complications:

If left untreated, fistulas can cause sores, kidney infections, and even death. The nerve damage from fistula can also affect a woman's legs and ability to walk.

Prevention:**Society:**

- Make family planning available to all who desire it
- Increase the number of trained birth attendants and access to emergency obstetric care
- Encourage the community to use a skilled birth attendant during delivery and seek medical advice if delivery is prolonged or traumatic

Individual:

- Avoid early pregnancy and use contraception
- Have delivery and labour attended by a skilled medical professional
- Find out where the nearest emergency obstetric care is available before labour begins
- Seek emergency care when complications arise
- If vaginal fistula was the result of sexual assault, seek advice and help from the authorities, family and friends
- Call for change and increased access to contraception services and pre-natal care to avoid complications and early pregnancy

Treatment:

Once a fistula has formed, the only treatment is reconstructive surgery. If a woman is able to access this treatment, her chances of healing and living a normal life are very good.

Summary and Key Messages:

- Vaginal fistula is a hole between a woman's vagina and bladder or rectum, which causes her to leak faeces or urine from her vagina
- Fistula can be prevented by seeking appropriate medical care during childbirth, especially when complications (such as prolonged labour) arise
- Avoiding early pregnancy by delaying sexual activity or using contraception can also help prevent fistula
- Once fistula has formed, it can only be cured with surgery
- Call for change in the community to provide increased access to skilled medical professionals and contraception services

Sources:

<https://www.fistulafoundation.org/what-is-fistula/fast-facts-faq/>

<http://www.endfistula.org/what-fistula>