

WOMEN'S HEALTH 18 YEARS AFTER RUPTURE OF THE ANAL SPHINCTER DURING CHILDBIRTH.

Hypothesis / aims of study

Maternal anal sphincter tears during childbirth are associated with subsequent fecal incontinence despite primary repair. The long-term impact of this complication of vaginal delivery is not well known.

Study design, materials and methods

From the 4569 women who delivered in 1982 and 1983 in our hospital we selected the 445 women (9.7%) having sustained an anal sphincter tear during childbirth and 445 control women who were group-matched for parity. Eighteen years later we contacted them and send a postal questionnaire assessing general health, urinary and faecal incontinence, and sexual satisfaction. The main outcome measure was faecal incontinence graded by the Wexner score, which measures incontinence to flatus, liquid or solid stools, need to wear a pad, and lifestyle alterations.

Results

We were able to locate 701/890 (78.8%) of the women who were on average 46.6 (SD 4.6) years old, and 549/890 (61.7%) returned the questionnaire.

Faecal incontinence symptoms (mostly occasional involuntary passage of flatus) were reported by 132/259 (51.0%) women with a sphincter tear and 113/281 (40.2%) controls (risk difference 10.8%, 95% confidence interval 2.4% to 19.11%, P=0.01) . Severe faecal incontinence (Wexner score above 4) was reported by 34/259 (13.1%) women after a sphincter tear and 22/281 (7.8%) controls (risk ratio 1.68, 95% confidence interval 1.01 to 2.79, P=0.04).

After a sphincter tear, women had poorer scores in specific quality of life domains affected by faecal incontinence (P=0.02). Moreover, the mental component of the generic short-form-12 health survey showed lower scores among women with a previous sphincter tear (P=0.05). The prevalence of urinary incontinence and sexual satisfaction were similar in women with and without a previous sphincter tear. Only 68/252 (26.9%) women knew they had sustained an anal sphincter tear.

The proportion of faecal incontinence attributable to an anal sphincter tear in this population was only 3.9%.

Interpretation of results

Anal sphincter tears during childbirth are associated with long-term faecal incontinence. Although most women experience minor symptoms, their quality of life is affected and their mental well-being might be affected. Paradoxically, only a minority of women with faecal incontinence have a history of sphincter tear.

Concluding message

Interventions to prevent, diagnose and treat faecal incontinence, a significant maternal morbidity 18 years after delivery, should be promoted.

FUNDING: Swiss National Science Foundation, grants 32-55907.98 and 3200-064056.00