WHO recommendation on digital vaginal examination

15 February 2018

Recommendation

Digital vaginal examination at intervals of four hours is recommended for routine assessment of active first stage of labour in low-risk women.

(Recommended)

Publication history

First published: February 2018

Updated: No update planned

Assessed as up-to-date: February 2018

Remarks

- This recommendation has been integrated from the WHO recommendations for prevention and treatment of maternal peripartum infections: WHO recommendation on digital vaginal examination at intervals of four hours for routine assessment of active first stage of labour in low-risk women, in which the GDG for that guideline determined it to be a strong recommendation based on very low-quality evidence.

- There is currently no direct evidence on the most appropriate frequency of vaginal examinations to prevent infectious morbidity in the mother and baby, and therefore this recommendation was based on consensus reached by the GDG, and it is in agreement with a similar recommendation in the 2014 WHO recommendations for augmentation of labour.

- Priority must be given to restricting the frequency and total number of vaginal examinations. This is particularly crucial in situations when there are other risk factors for infection (e.g. prolonged rupture of amniotic membranes and long duration of labour).

- The GDG acknowledged that the frequency of vaginal examinations is dependent on the context of care and the progress of labour. The group agreed that vaginal examinations at intervals more frequent than specified in this recommendation may be warranted by the condition of the mother or the baby.

- Vaginal examinations of the same woman by multiple caregivers around the same time or at different time points should be avoided. The group noted that this practice is common in teaching settings where multiple cadres of staff (or students) perform vaginal examinations for learning purposes.

- The evidence supporting this recommendation can be found in the source guideline document,
Related links

WHO recommendations on intrapartum care for a positive childbirth experience

(2018) - full document and evidence tables

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Home > WHO recommendation on digital vaginal examination