

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS ABOUT

Pelvic Floor Muscles

What is your pelvic floor and where is it?

The pelvic floor forms a sling of muscles that extend from your pubic bone at the front of the pelvis to the coccyx (tailbone) at the back. They have three openings, one at the front from the bladder (urethra) and one in the middle (vagina) and one at the back (rectum/anus).

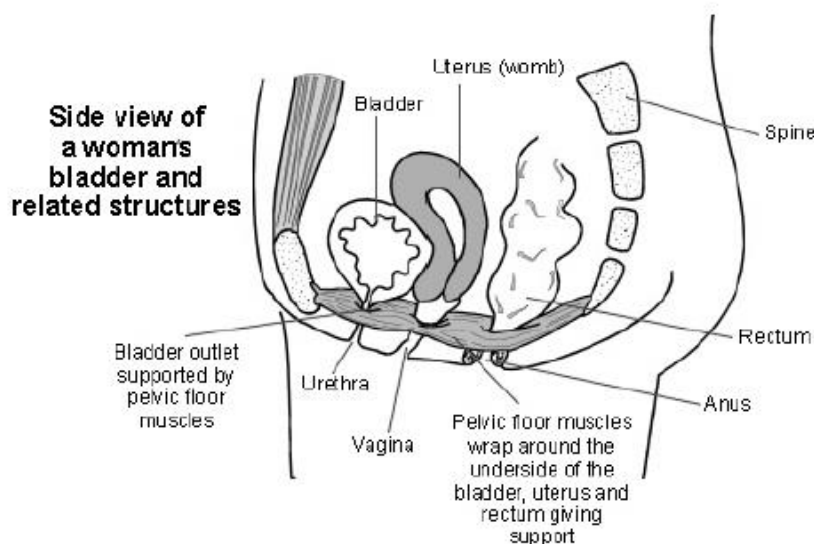


Diagram copy EMIS and PIP 2006, as distributed on www.patient.co.uk

Bladder, bowel and sexual functions all require good pelvic floor muscles. These muscles along with the abdominal muscles are important for posture and help to support your spine.

Pelvic floor muscles work to help prevent unwanted leakage (incontinence) by keeping the bladder and bowel openings closed. It is also important that these muscles relax to allow easy bladder and bowel emptying. Good pelvic floor muscles can also improve the vaginal sensation helping with sexual intercourse.

Why problems may occur with the pelvic floor muscles.

Causes:

Like any other muscles of the body the pelvic floor muscles can be weak, too tight, torn, overstretched or slow to work.

Pregnancy and childbirth- can cause pelvic floor weakness especially if you have had an assisted delivery, significant tear, episiotomy or a very large baby.

Menopause- may lead to pelvic floor problems or worsen existing problems due to the vaginal and hormonal changes.

Chronic constipation- regular straining to empty your bowels can overstretch the muscles and cause weakness. Poor relaxation of the pelvic floor muscles can cause difficulties to empty your bowels.

High impact exercise, heavy or repeated lifting- can cause an increase in the abdominal pressure putting the pelvic floor muscles under strain. These muscles can be over loaded with heavy weight lifting and vigorous gym activities such as jumping.

Increased body weight- may increase the pressure on the pelvic floor muscles.

Smoking-, which can cause coughing, can increase pressure on these muscles. Other conditions such as neurological conditions and diabetes may also have an effect on the pelvic floor muscles.

If the pelvic floor muscles weaken, you may experience a range of symptoms:

Bladder

- Leaking urine with activity for example running, jumping, coughing and sneezing (stress urinary incontinence)
- An urge to visit the toilet often (frequency)
- An urgent need to visit the toilet and leaking before you get there (urge incontinence)
- Increased need to urinate at night (nocturia)

Bowel

- Leaking faeces when you cough, sneeze and complete activities (faecal stress incontinence)
- An urge to visit the toilet and leaking before you get there (urge faecal incontinence)
- Difficulties with wiping post defecation
- Poor control of wind

Vaginal

- Heaviness in the vagina or the sensation that something is coming down (pelvic organ prolapse)
- Vaginal or abdominal pain
- Reduced sensation with intercourse
- Difficulty with sexual intercourse, reducing sensation or pain

The pelvic floor muscles have two types of muscle fibres in them:

Slow twitch muscle fibres have constant tone in them (even when you are asleep). They support your pelvic organs up inside you and work to keep your passages closed until you are ready to go to the toilet.

Fast twitch muscle fibres which contract quickly to prevent leakage of urine when there is extra pressure on the bladder e.g. when you cough, sneeze, laugh or lift something heavy.

For patients with catheters

If you have a catheter in place only start your pelvic floor muscle exercises once your catheter has been removed and you have passed urine normally more than three times without problems.

How to exercise your pelvic floor muscles

Pelvic floor muscle exercises should include both long and short squeezes. It is important that you let the muscle relax after each contraction to ensure the muscles become strong and most effective.

Exercise 1

Step 1

Sit, stand or lie comfortably with your knees slightly apart.

Step 2

Gently breathe in to prepare and, as you breathe out, tighten the muscle around your back passage as if you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind, now slowly tighten the muscles around your front passage as if you are trying to stop yourself passing urine; lift up from back to front and hold.

Aim to hold both back and front pelvic floor muscles tight for 5-10 seconds (without holding your breath). Fully relax for 4 seconds and aim to repeat up to 10 times. Avoid tightening your buttocks and squeezing your legs together. You should feel your lower abdomen draw in slightly.

Exercise 2

To perform the short squeezes

In the same position as exercise 1, tighten the back and front pelvic floor muscles for a short strong squeeze followed by relaxing the muscles fully.

Aim to build up to 10 short squeezes without holding your breath.

Aiming to repeat both long and short squeezes 3-6 times a day

Your starting point- this is the maximum number of seconds you can hold your contraction for (up to 10 seconds) and the maximum times you can repeat this (up to 10 repetitions).

Build up your exercise routine gradually and you should notice an improvement in the first three months (this can sometimes take longer). Aim to progress the position you do your exercises in progressing from lying to sitting to standing and, over time, practise them whilst doing activities such as walking and bending.

Keep practising your pelvic floor muscle exercises twice a day to maintain the improvement.

Tips to remember to exercise:

- Try to make the exercises part of your daily routine. Perhaps do them at the same time as another activity:
brushing your teeth / when washing your hands/ after emptying your bladder sat on the toilet.

Please do not practise by stopping your urine flow as this may lead to bladder problems.

Additional suggestions:

- Try downloading an app on your phone NHS squeezy app
- Put a reminder on your phone

Medical devices and gadgets aim to help you with developing pelvic floor strength and control are available to purchase. These may be helpful for some people but may not be right for everyone. If you are having difficulties with these exercises seek advice from a specialist clinician.

Further useful tips and advice:

- **Constipation-**try to avoid unnecessary strain on your pelvic floor, seek advice if you tend to strain on the toilet from your GP or clinician. Make sure you drink at least 1.5 litres of fluid daily and enough fibre in a well-balanced diet.
- **Toileting positions-** Sit and completely relax while on the toilet and use a stool or step under your feet to help create a squatting position. This will improve the position of your rectum and allow easier emptying when passing a stool.
- **The “Knack” technique-** This is a technique to help prevent straining before an activity that raises the abdominal pressure such as sneezing, coughing, lifting and laughing try to tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- **Bladder concerns-** do not reduce your fluid intake to help with bladder urgency or frequency as this will make your urine stronger. This can lead to irritation of the bladder and cause constipation.

- **Bladder irritants-** avoid fizzy, artificial sweetened and caffeinated drinks such as coffee, tea and green tea.
- **Relaxation-** Increased stress can cause changes to posture and breathing thereby increasing the tension in muscles pelvic floor muscles. Mindfulness techniques can improve breathing and help to relax the muscles.
- **Weight-** being overweight can increase your symptoms; small changes to your weight can improve symptoms. See your GP practice for additional support if you have tried but not succeeded with weight loss.
- **Exercise-** If you experience stress urinary incontinence try low impact exercises such as pilates, swimming, walking. You may want to avoid high impact exercises that increase the abdominal pressure such as dead lifts, loaded squats and jumping
- **Smoking-** if you can, try to give up, your GP practice might be able to support you with this.

Additional resources:

<https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/womens-health/what-are-pelvic-floor-exercises/>

<https://www.bbuk.org.uk/>

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Continence Service
Knaresborough Medical Centre
Knaresborough Road
Harrogate
HG2 7LU
01423 557495

Women's and Men's Health Physiotherapy
Harrogate District Hospital
Lancaster Park Road
Harrogate HG2 7SX
01423 885959
Direct line: 01423 553089
www.hdft.nhs.uk

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