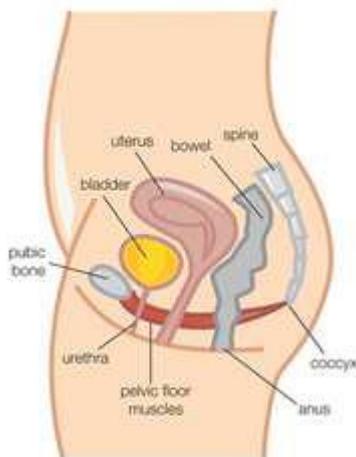


Pelvic floor exercises

Introduction

The pelvic floor muscles are located between your legs and run from your pubic bone at the front to the base of your spine at the back. They fill the gap between the bones you sit on. The pelvic floor muscles hold your pelvic organs and help control your bladder and bowel. Urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse are very common conditions but can often improve by doing pelvic floor exercises.



Symptoms of Pelvic Floor Dysfunction

You may have more than one of the following symptoms:

Bladder:

- Leakage with coughing, sneezing and activity which may include sexual intercourse (stress urinary incontinence)
- Urgency - a sudden need to go to the toilet that may include leakage (urge urinary incontinence)
- Going to the toilet too often (frequency)
- Getting up at night to go to the toilet (nocturnal)

Bowel:

- Leakage with activity or urge (anal incontinence)
- Difficulty getting clean after bowel movements (having a poo)
- Leakage of wind

Vaginal:

- A feeling of something coming down, or heaviness (pelvic organ prolapse)
- Pain which can be vaginal or sometimes abdominal
- Lack of sensation during sex

Benefits of pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor exercises can help you to achieve:

- Better bladder control
- Better bowel control
- Support for pelvic organs (prevent prolapse)
- Improved sensitivity
- Improved orgasms
- Improved muscle condition and strength.

How to do pelvic floor exercises

The following exercises will help you to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. (Please read the entire programme before beginning the exercises).

Long squeezes

- Your pelvic floor muscles have to work constantly to support your pelvic organs. The endurance exercise will help to do this:
- It is important to get the right muscles working in the right way. Make sure you are in a comfortable position, either lying or sitting.
- Start by concentrating on your breathing. Breathe in, getting some air into the bottom of your lungs and letting your tummy relax. Inhale and the tummy rises, exhale and tummy falls.
- Now allow your pelvic floor to join in: Inhale and pelvic floor relaxes, exhale and pelvic floor tightens.
- Start by tightening around your back passage (as if stopping yourself passing wind).
- At the same time pull forwards and up as if trying to stop the flow of urine. A squeeze and lift feeling.
- Continue pulling up towards your tummy button (navel) as if zipping up a pair of trousers. You will be aware of a gentle tightness in your lower tummy.
- Try not to hold your breath. You can also try counting out loud so as to encourage normal breathing.

1. Hold tight for as many seconds as you can, making sure that you are continuing to breathe (if you cannot do this practice the pelvic floor contraction and breathing before you progress), as soon as you feel the muscles starting to fade – LET GO.

How long can you hold? (Aim for 10 second hold).

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Advice for patients

Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service

Jan21/review Oct22

www.somersetft.nhs.uk

2. Let the pelvic floor muscles fully relax and recover for 10 seconds. This is as important as the contraction.

How many times can you repeat this hold, when the last is as good as the first? Aim for 10 repetitions.

Short Squeezes

It is also important that you train your muscles to react quickly to sudden changes in pressure, for example when you cough and sneeze. Therefore it is recommended that you do this exercise.

- Start by tightening around your back passage (as if stopping yourself passing wind).
- At the same time pull forwards and up as if trying to stop the flow of urine.
- Continue pulling up towards your tummy button (navel) as if zipping up a pair of trousers. You will be aware of a gentle tightness in your lower tummy.

1. NOW LET GO straight away (do not hold), ensuring that your pelvic floor has totally relaxed.

2. Repeat. How many times can you repeat this? (Repeat no more than 10 times).

You need to work these muscles until they tire and to do them exercises regularly.

You need to do your exercises at least 3 times a day.

Note: If you experience pain when exercising the pelvic floor muscles, or if you have abdominal or pelvic pain after doing the exercises, you should seek specialist advice from a physiotherapist.

Positions

These can be done in a variety of positions. You may find it easier to commence your exercises in lying or sitting. As your muscles improve, aim to do the exercises in other positions, such as standing, squatting and lunging. Eventually you can do your exercises while walking or doing other forms of exercise. It is important to focus on the exercise. For further progression you may wish to consult your pelvic health physiotherapist.

Functional bracing

It does not matter how strong your muscles are, they will only work if you use them at the right times. Therefore you need to tighten your pelvic floor muscles and your deep tummy muscles before you

- cough, sneeze or blow your nose
- lift or carry
- get up from sitting
- go from stand to sit
- get out of bed
- do any other activity where you are likely to need support or leak e.g. bending/exercising

After the activity ensure that your pelvic floor has totally relaxed.

Top tips

- Letting the muscles relax is just as important as tightening
- Avoid tightening your buttocks or thigh muscles
- Relaxation - it is just as important to have pelvic floor muscles that can relax as it is for them to be contract. Increased stress can cause changes to your posture and breathing and this can put more tension on all your muscles including your pelvic floor. If this is a problem it is best to consult your Pelvic Health Physiotherapist
- Remembering exercises
 - build it into your day
 - put a reminder on your phone such as an app
 - try one of the pelvic floor exercise apps
 - bring into your regular gym regime
- Some people like to use gadgets to remember, they don't always suit everyone so it is best to consult with your Pelvic Health Physiotherapist
- Do not give up; it can take 3-6 months to see even small benefits. It is a marathon and not a sprint.

Liquid intake

You should aim to drink about 1500-2000mls of liquid a day, which is six to eight glasses. It is important that you don't restrict the amount of fluid you drink as this won't reduce your symptoms and could make things worse. Avoiding caffeine in drinks is also beneficial.

Frequently asked questions

How long do I have to do pelvic floor exercises?

Pelvic floor exercises are beneficial throughout your life and it is recommended you continue them for life.

Does my weight have anything to do with my problems?

Maintaining a healthy weight can help considerably by reducing the strain placed on the pelvic floor muscles. Read more on lifestyle changes to reduce weight – visit www.nhs.uk/livewell/loseweight

Why are my symptoms worse when I am constipated?

Straining when constipated puts extra pressure on the pelvic floor muscles.

- Avoid constipation
- Try to develop good toileting habits: do not strain, sit fully on the toilet, your feet should be flat and your knees (if you can) should be at 90 degrees or higher, never push.
- Some patients may need to support the perineum (the area between the back passage and vagina) to aid with emptying the bowels effectively
- Drink adequate fluids
- Maintain a good diet with adequate soluble/insoluble fibre
- [Watch a NHS constipation webinar:](http://patientwebinars.co.uk/condition/constipation/webinars/)

I leak when picking up a heavy weight. Can I do anything to stop this?

Remember to tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you lift and hold it tight until you have lowered the weight, as lifting puts a strain on the pelvic floor muscles.

Are there any exercises I should avoid?

If you have stress urinary incontinence you may need to avoid very high impact exercise initially which involve jumping, heavy weights or other exercises that produce increased abdominal pressure such as double leg lifts. Please discuss this with your Pelvic Health Physiotherapist.

Can smoking make my symptoms worse?

They might cause a regular cough which may put pressure on the pelvic floor muscles. Try to give up if you can. Your doctor might be able to refer you to a smoking cessation group.

Can Menopause increase my symptoms?

Vaginal changes after the menopause may make your pelvic floor problems worse.

Other resources

Pelvic, Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy patient information and advice
www.thepogp.co.uk

Start the NHS weight loss plan www.nhs.uk/livewell/loseweight

Watch a 10 minute NHS webinar on constipation
<https://patientwebinars.co.uk/condition/constipation/webinars/>

Advice on stopping smoking www.nhs.uk/smokefree/help-and-advice/support

Support from the bladder and bowel community www.bladderandbowel.org

Buy an app for pelvic floor exercises www.nhs.uk/apps-library/squeezy/

PositivePause – a magazine for people experiencing menopause www.positivepause.co.uk/

Read more on any condition on the NHS website www.nhs.uk/conditions

Remember - pelvic floor exercises are for life!