

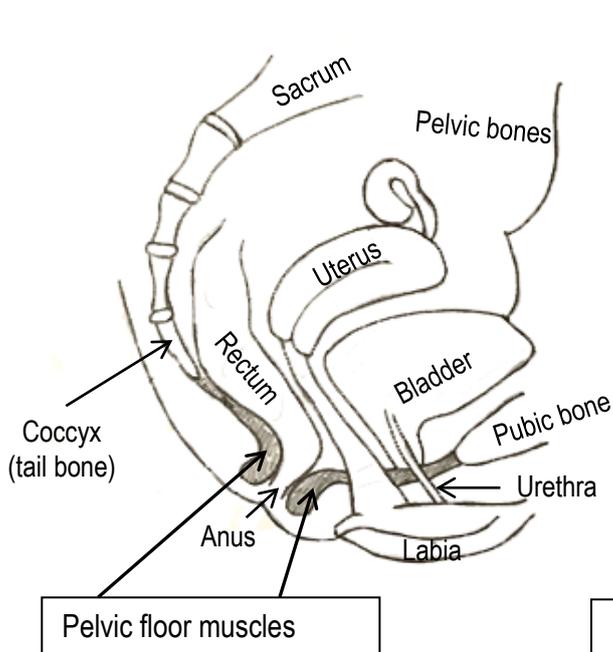
Cancer and your pelvic floor

This leaflet gives you advice, information and some basic exercises to help prevent and treat symptoms of *pelvic floor dysfunction* as a result of cancer treatments.

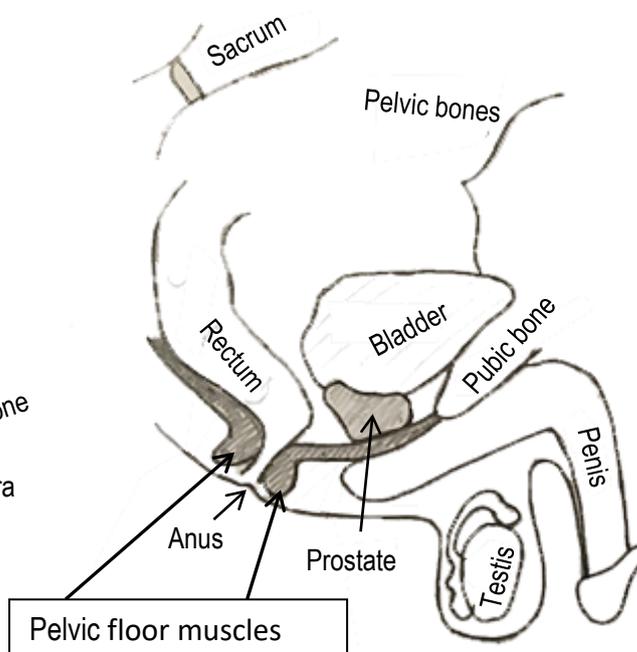
What is the pelvic floor and what does it do?

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles that form a 'sling' or 'hammock' at the bottom of the pelvis. They attach to your pubic bone at the front and to your coccyx (tail bone) at the back. The pelvic floor helps to **support your pelvic organs**, such as the bladder and bowel, and in women the uterus (womb), and they help to **keep you continent (able to control urine or faeces)**.

Female pelvic floor



Male pelvic floor



Pelvic floor dysfunction

Symptoms of pelvic floor dysfunction include being **unable to control urine and/or faeces**, **pelvic pain**, **pain on sexual intercourse**, and **sexual dysfunction**, including erectile dysfunction and anorgasmia (inability to have an orgasm).

Urinary and faecal incontinence can be common in women who have had children, or who are past the menopause (change).

However, they are also common in **both women and men** who have had **treatment to the pelvic region for cancer**, particularly radiotherapy or surgery.

Radiotherapy and chemotherapy affect the way muscles rebuild themselves and maintain their strength. Over time, this can lead to muscles becoming weak and less effective. Surgery can also damage the pelvic floor muscles, weakening them further.

The pelvic floor muscles can become too weak to hold urine or faeces inside, especially if there is an increase in abdominal pressure (for example in sneezing, coughing, or laughing). The only way to improve this loss of strength is to exercise the muscles and make them stronger.

Strong pelvic floor muscles also **prevent prolapse** ('falling down') of abdominal organs, and **contribute to better sexual function**.

How do I exercise my pelvic floor muscles?

First, you need to locate your pelvic floor muscles. If you have never exercised these muscles before, they can be difficult to locate initially.

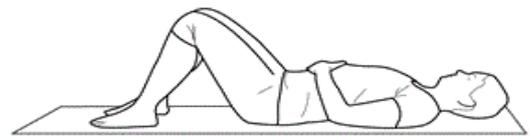
- **Women:** Imagine stopping yourself from peeing and pooing, and contract these muscles. Or, insert a finger into the vagina and try to tighten the muscles around your finger. These are the pelvic floor muscles. It should feel like a 'squeeze and lift'.
- **Men:** Imagine stopping yourself from peeing and pooing, and contract these muscles. Or, place a fingertip over the entrance of your anus and try to tighten the muscles under your fingertip. These are the pelvic floor muscles. It should feel like a 'squeeze and lift'.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises

There are two types of pelvic floor muscle exercises; slow ones and fast ones. You need to practise both, so that you build both strength and endurance.

Try to do them at least 3 times per day.

Begin by lying down with your knees up and feet flat on the bed (crook lying).



Slow contractions:

©Physiotools

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles and hold for up to 10 seconds.
- You may find, to start with, that you can only hold for 2 or 3 seconds before the contraction 'melts away'. If this happens, start your slow contractions at 3 seconds and gradually build up to 10 seconds as your muscles get stronger.
- Do not let the contraction 'melt away', release it voluntarily. If you cannot do this, try holding for fewer seconds.
- Rest for 5 seconds between each contraction, to allow your pelvic floor to fully relax.
- Repeat as many times as you can; up to 10 times.

Fast contractions:

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles and hold for 1 second, then release.
- Rest for 5 seconds, to allow your pelvic floor to fully relax.
- Repeat as many times as you can, up to 10 times.

Pelvic floor muscles take a long time to strengthen, so you may not see any benefit for 6 to 12 weeks, but it is very important that you keep up with the exercises.

Further advice and information

If you need help or more information, ask for the physiotherapist on Adelaide Ward. The contact number is 0118 322 7472.

For further information and reading, go to <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatment/types-of-treatment/radiotherapy/pelvic-radiotherapy/pelvic-floor-exercises-after-treatment>

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

RBFT Oncology/Physiotherapy, March 2022

Next review due: March 2024