



Chronic cough and your pelvic floor

This leaflet is for patients with a chronic cough and gives advice on exercising the pelvic floor to improve muscle strength and prevent urine leakage.

How does having a chronic cough affect your pelvic floor?

A chronic cough (a cough lasting more than 8 weeks) places repeated pressure on your abdomen and pelvic floor muscles. Every cough causes a sudden increase in pressure, and over time this can weaken the pelvic floor.

This may lead to:

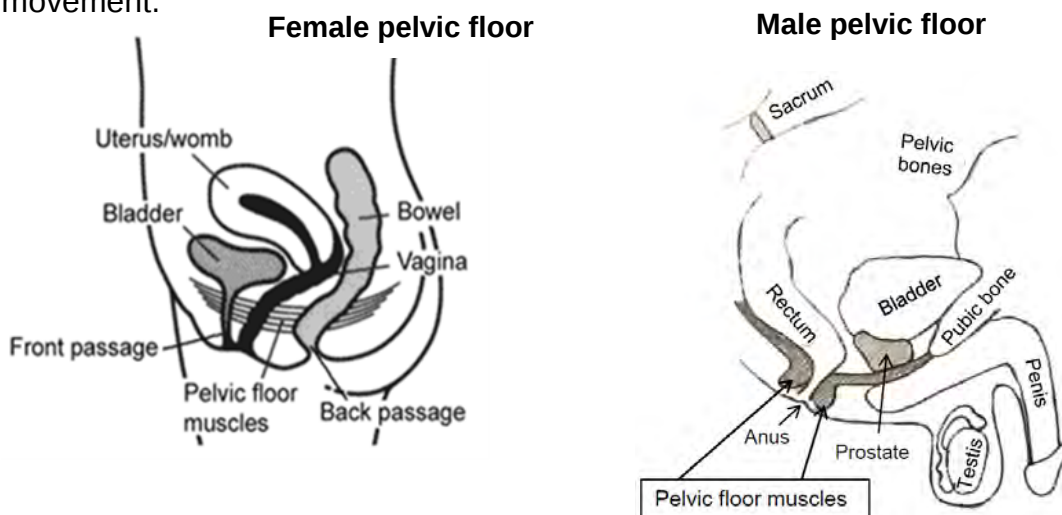
- Urine leakage when you cough, sneeze or exercise (known as 'stress urinary incontinence')
- A feeling of heaviness or vaginal bulging (known as 'pelvic organ prolapse')
- Pelvic floor muscle fatigue or discomfort
- Reduced confidence in daily activities

What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles and connective tissues that support your internal organs, including:

- Bladder
- Bowel
- Uterus – the womb (in women) or prostate (in men)

Pelvic floor muscles help control bladder and bowel function and provide support during movement.



What can help?

- **Treat the cough:** Managing the cause of your cough is important. Speak to your GP or healthcare professional if your cough has lasted longer than 8 weeks.
- **Learn "The Knack":** Just before you cough, tighten your pelvic floor muscles firmly and hold the contraction through the cough. This can reduce urine leakage and protect the pelvic floor.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises:

Slow exercises

- Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart (or lie down with your knees bent).
- Squeeze your pelvic area as if you are trying to hold in a tampon or stop wind and urine from coming out. Do not use your tummy muscles, legs or buttocks (bottom cheeks) when you are doing this exercise. Your buttocks and legs should not move at all.
- When you can do this, squeeze the muscles as tight as you can, and hold for as long as you can, up to 10 seconds. You may not be able to hold it for more than 2-3 seconds at first.
- You should be aware of the skin around the back passage tightening and being pulled up and away from the chair. Repeat this as often as you can, up to 10 times, but have a rest of 4-5 seconds in between each one.

Fast exercises

- It is also important to train the pelvic floor muscles to react quickly to stop you leaking when you cough or sneeze. Therefore, practice tightening your pelvic floor quickly and then relax.
- Fast exercises are done in the same way as slow exercises but when you squeeze the muscles, let go immediately so that you only feel a very quick lift in your pelvic floor. You should repeat these exercises between 10-20 times.
- The fast and slow exercises together make up one exercise session. You should do 3-5 sessions per day. If you do less than 3 sessions, you risk not building enough strength to help your symptoms. Your muscles will improve and strengthen with time and exercise.
- You will need to do these exercises every day for life, in order to keep their strength. Think of it as a habit, like cleaning your teeth.
- Pelvic floor exercises can be done in any position and at any time. It helps to associate these exercises with activities you do regularly every day, e.g., when boiling the kettle, watching TV, brushing your teeth, waiting at traffic lights, waiting for the bus or in a supermarket queue.

Helpful tips

- Avoid becoming constipated. Straining to empty bowels (have a poo) may make urinary, bowel and prolapse symptoms worse.
- It is important to sit relaxed on the toilet seat with feet supported and knees higher than your hips – try keeping a small footstool near the toilet to raise your legs up.
- Cut down on caffeine and alcohol intake, and replace with decaffeinated tea, coffee, and water. Diluted fruit juice, squash and herbal/fruit teas can also help keep up your fluid intake .
- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles before coughing, sneezing, shouting, lifting or any time where there is an increase in the pressure on the muscles. This is called “the knack.”
- If you are overweight, losing weight helps to reduce extra strain on the pelvic floor muscles.
- Avoid lifting heavy weights if possible.
- It can take 3 months or longer to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles. It is important to be persistent and to stick with the exercises in order to see a good improvement.

When should I seek help?

See your GP or pelvic health physiotherapist if you:

- Leak urine (wee) regularly.
- Feel a vaginal bulge or a bulge in your back passage.
- Have persistent pelvic pain.
- Have a cough lasting more than 8 weeks.
- Notice symptoms that interfere with your daily life.

Where to find more information

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Incontinence-urinary/

www.continence-foundation.org.uk/

Contacting us

If you have any questions about the above, please contact:

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

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

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