



Pelvic floor muscle exercises

This leaflet outlines exercises you can do to help with symptoms of urinary urgency, urge and stress incontinence, frequency, and symptoms of prolapse.

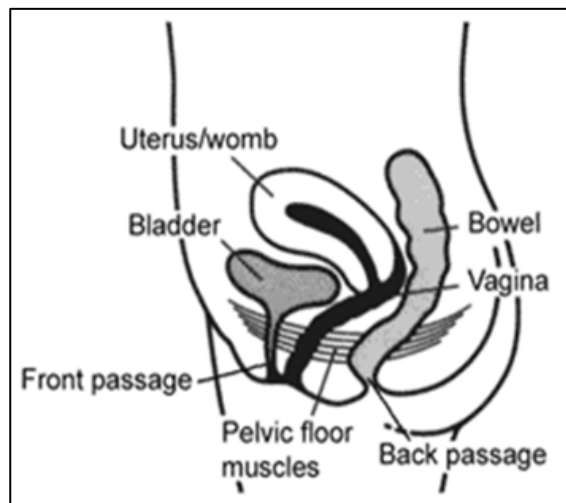
Pelvic floor muscles

These are the sling of muscles that fill the bottom of the pelvis and form squeezing muscles surrounding the back, vaginal and urethral passages. These are the same muscles you use when you want to stop yourself passing urine or wind.

Why is it important to do pelvic floor exercises?

These muscles support the pelvic organs, control the bladder and bowels and are used during normal sexual function. Therefore, it is important to strengthen the pelvic floor to have better control of the bladder and bowels, to improve support of pelvic organs and to improve sexual function.

Weakness of these muscles can be caused by childbirth, constipation, persistent cough or occur around the menopause. Some people experience leaking of urine during activities such as coughing, sneezing, laughing, exercising, lifting and playing sport. This is called stress urinary incontinence. The pelvic floor muscles are unable to cope with the increased intra-abdominal pressure at these times. Some people experience sudden urges to pass urine and may leak urine before they arrive at the toilet. This is called urge incontinence. Some people feel a dragging sensation, pressure, or a bulge around the vagina. These symptoms are usually a result of pelvic organ prolapse. Exercising the pelvic floor muscles are helpful in all the above conditions.



How do I know which muscle to exercise?

If you do not know where your pelvic floor is, you can find it by imagining you are going to the toilet and are trying to stop yourself, or you can put two fingers into your vagina and try to squeeze around them. You could also imagine trying to suck something up into your vagina. The muscles you use to do this are your pelvic floor muscles, and you should feel your vaginal and back passage muscles tighten and lift a little.

How do I exercise the muscles?

You must do both fast and slow exercises to make your pelvic floor muscles stronger. It is important to learn to do the exercises in the right way and to check from time to time that you are still doing them properly.

Slow exercises

- You should sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart (or lie down with your knees bent).
- Squeeze 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 two or three 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 ten times, but have a rest in between each one for 4-5 seconds.

Fast exercises

- It is also important to work 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 maintain 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., boiling the kettle, watching TV, brushing your teeth, waiting at traffic lights, waiting for the bus or in a supermarket queue.

Helpful tips

- Avoid constipation. Straining to empty bowels 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 to 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 fluid intake up.
- Tighten 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 in reducing extra strain on the pelvic floor muscles.
- Avoid lifting heavy weights if you can.
- It can take three 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.

Where to find more information

- www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Incontinence-urinary/Pages/Introduction.aspx
- www.continence-foundation.org.uk/

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

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

J Churches, RBFT W&C Physiotherapist, April 2020.

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