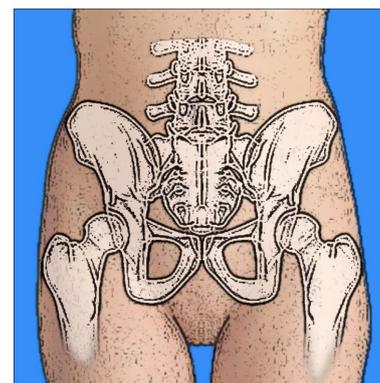


Chronic pelvic pain (CPP)

This leaflet gives you information, advice and exercises if you are experiencing chronic (long-standing) pain anywhere in your pelvic area. If you have any questions, please speak to your physiotherapist.

What is chronic pelvic pain?

Pain anywhere in this area (from the lower tummy down to the hips) is called pelvic pain. 'Chronic' means long-standing; it means you have had the pain for a long time.



How does chronic pelvic pain feel?

Pelvic pain takes many forms. It can be mild or severe, feel constant or only there sometimes. The pain could feel:

- Sharp
- Cramping
- Shooting
- Aching
- Pressure
- Burning

The pain is often made worse by long walks, prolonged sitting, cycling, tight clothing, or opening your bowels (having a poo). Some people also have pain when engaging in, or attempting, sexual activities.

If you have had pain for a long time, your body might have become 'used to' the pain being there. Your nervous system can become stuck in a state of over-activity and maintain or prolong the pain even after any initial injury is healed. This is called 'central sensitisation'. It happens to many people who have chronic pain, and it does not mean that your pain is not real.

What causes chronic pelvic pain?

Pelvic pain can originate from any of the organs in the pelvis (bladder, bowel, womb, ovaries, fallopian tubes), or from the nerves, blood vessels, muscles or connective tissues (sometimes called fascia).

Your doctor will already have investigated or ruled out any infection, lesion, tumour, organ dysfunction or other medically treatable cause for your pain, if you have been referred for physiotherapy.

Physiotherapy can sometimes help with pain that might be coming from the muscles, connective tissues or nerves.

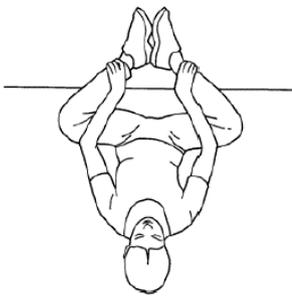
This pain could be caused by:

- Tense or 'tight' muscles and/or connective tissue in the pelvic area, including the pelvic floor muscles.
- Scar tissue or adhesions within the pelvic, genital or lower tummy areas; for example, from surgeries, accident, childbirth, or cancer treatments like radiotherapy.
- Nerve irritation or entrapment.

What can I do to help myself?

The exercises below are specifically designed to help relax, stretch or strengthen muscles in the pelvic area. Your physiotherapist will tell you which of these exercises you need to do, and if you need to do any extra exercises other than the ones listed here.

Stretching exercises



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'Happy baby' stretch

Lie down on your back, bring your knees towards your chest and hold on to your ankles or feet.

You should feel a stretch around your bottom, genitals, lower back and thighs.

Hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times per day

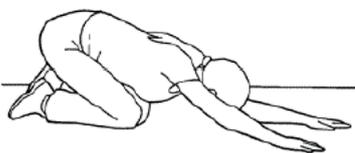


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'Frog' stretch

Sit down with your legs apart. Bend your knees and put the soles of your feet together, if you can. If you cannot, just bring them together as close as you can. Allow your knees to drop out to the sides. You will feel a stretch in your inner thighs and around your bottom.

Hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times per day.



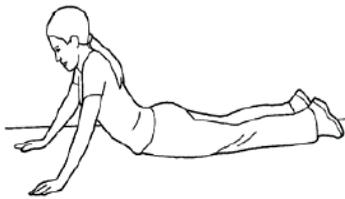
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'Child's pose'

Kneel down, keeping your knees wide. Lean forward, stretching your arms above your head and letting your tummy drop between your knees. You can rest your forehead on the ground if you can get down that far.

You will feel slight stretching around your bottom, genital area, thighs and lower back.

Rest in this position for at least 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times per day.



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'Cobra' stretch

Lie down on your tummy. Place your hands palm down on the ground under your shoulders and push your head and shoulders up off the ground as far as you can, or until your elbows are straight. You will feel a stretch in your tummy and the front of your pelvis. Hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times per day.



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Hip stretch

Lie down with your legs over the edge of the bed. Bend one knee and bring it up towards your chest, leaving the other leg hanging over the edge of the bed. You will feel a stretch over the lower tummy and hip of the leg that is hanging. Hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds. Repeat on the other leg. Repeat on both legs 3 times per day.



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Bottom stretch

Sit down, and bring the ankle of one leg up onto the knee of the other leg. Lean forward. You will feel a stretch deep in your bottom on the side of the leg being stretched. Hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds. Repeat on the other leg. Repeat on both legs 3 times per day.

Strengthening exercises



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Wide bridge

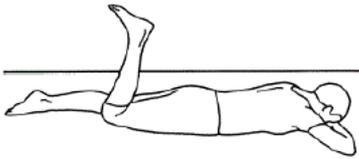
Lie down on your back, with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, keeping your feet wide apart. Put your arms by your sides. Pull your tummy button back towards your spine (engage your core), squeeze your bottom muscles and slowly lift your bottom off the floor. Hold for 10 seconds, then slowly lower back down. Repeat 10 times, 3 times per day.



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Clams

Lie down on your side with one leg on top of the other, bending your hips and knees. Keeping your ankles together, raise the top knee up and then back down. Be careful not to roll backwards; keep your hips level. Repeat 10 times, then swap sides. Repeat both legs 3 times per day.



Backward leg lift

Lie down on your front and bend one knee so that your foot faces the ceiling. Push your foot towards the ceiling (bringing your hip backwards and off the bed). Repeat 10 times, then swap sides. Repeat both legs 3 times per day.

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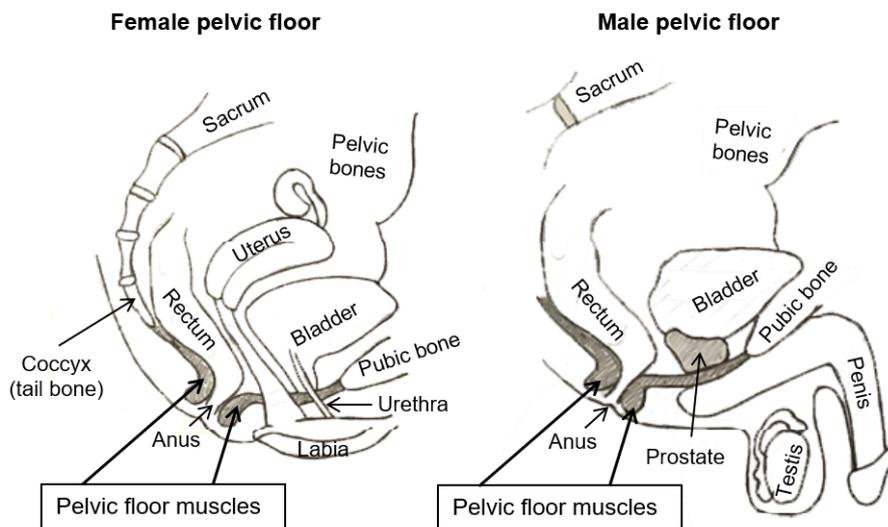
Squat

Stand with your feet apart. Gradually bend your knees, sticking your bottom out as if you were going to sit down. Hold for 10 seconds, then stand back up. Repeat 10 times, 3 times per day.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises

You may need to do both relaxation exercises and strengthening exercises for your pelvic floor muscles. Your physiotherapist will be able to tell you if you need to do both.

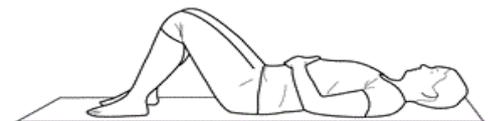
These are your pelvic floor muscles. They attach at your pubic bone at the front, run underneath and attach to your tail bone (coccyx) at the back. They act like a sling to support your pelvic organs, and help to keep you continent (able to control wee and poo).



Relaxing your pelvic floor muscles

Lie down with your knees bent and feet flat on the bed (crook lying).

Listen to your breathing. You may notice your stomach rising as you breathe in. This is called diaphragmatic breathing.



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Then follow these three steps:

- a) Breathe into your stomach so that it rises up. You can place your hands on your stomach to feel the stomach rising. Hold your breath for 4-5 seconds, making sure to keep your shoulders relaxed and your ribcage soft.
- b) While you are holding your breath, consciously relax your tummy downwards and relax your pelvic floor muscles from front to back opening (e.g. as if you are passing urine, opening your vaginal muscles as if using a dilator and as if opening your bowels. You could also use the image of your pelvis widening or a rosebud opening, until you feel them soften. Remember that this is NOT an active push; you are trying to 'let go' of all the muscles instead.
- c) Then 'sigh' the breath out, with an open mouth as if steaming up a window. This should be completely passive in nature.

The above technique does require lots of practice and concentration to begin with. Once you are able to do this consistently, incorporate it into your pelvic floor muscle training by **relaxing your pelvic floor muscles on the in-breath, and contracting them on the out-breath**. If you are doing slow contractions, remember to take normal breaths in between each contraction. Alternatively, you can complete this exercise sitting in a comfortable and supported position.

Strengthening your pelvic floor muscles

You should do both slow and fast exercises as detailed below, 4-5 times per day until you can do ten 10 second holds in a row and ten fast contractions.

- a) Tighten or squeeze around your back passage as if trying not to pass wind, around your vagina as if trying to hold in a tampon, and around the front as if trying not to pass urine.
- b) Then lift these muscles up towards your belly button. Nobody should be able to see you doing the exercise; you should not be using any muscles in your legs, abdomen or buttock cheeks.
- c) For the **slow exercises**, hold for several seconds (up to 10), then relax for a few seconds. Repeat up to 10 times. (To start with, you will probably only be able to hold for about 5 seconds, and will only be able to do them 4 or 5 times).
- d) For the **fast exercises**, hold for only one second then relax. Repeat up to 10 times.
- e) Remember that **you need to be in voluntary control of both the squeeze (tightening) and the relaxation**. If the squeeze is 'melting away' on its own before you've relaxed, you need to hold for less seconds and build up more slowly.

Internal trigger point massage of the pelvic floor can sometimes be helpful for tight pelvic floor muscles. Your physiotherapist will tell you if she thinks this will be helpful to you.

Instructions for internal trigger point massage:

- In a comfortable position, as above, insert a finger into the vagina and feel for any tender points in the muscles. If you get any pain or pressure around your bladder or back passage area, press and hold on that point until the pressure decreases. Then move on to different points, if any. If you do not feel pressure or pain in the other areas, you do not need to do this.
- Alternatively, you could use a pelvic wand such as the Therawand®, which is designed for this purpose, and can reach further into all the pelvic floor muscles with ease.

Dilators

Some people find that using dilators can be helpful if you have pain with sex. They are also useful if your vagina has tightened or shortened due to the menopause or cancer treatments. Using dilators can make healthcare checks such as smear tests more comfortable. They can also help improve scar tissue, and help desensitize the vulval and vaginal tissues if they have become hypersensitive to touch. Dilators come in different sizes, so you should start with the smallest one first. Vaginal dilators may sometimes be prescribed by your doctor or you can buy a set of graded dilators online.

Instructions for using vaginal dilators

- You can use dilators from about three times per week, up to a couple of times per day, provided you are not making your discomfort worse or causing soreness.
- Lie down somewhere quiet and private, with your knees bent and legs apart.
- Cover the dilator and the opening of your vagina with a water-based lubricant. Insert the rounded end of the dilator into the vagina using gentle pressure, and continue to insert until you feel some tightness in the muscles or a little discomfort (not pain).
- Leave the dilator there for a few seconds while the muscles relax, then see if you can insert it a little further.
- Gently move the dilator around in circles to help widen the vagina, and up and down to stretch the length of the vagina, for about 10 minutes. You can use more lubricant as needed.
- When you are able to do this comfortably with the smallest dilator, you can move up to the next size.
- If there is any bleeding after dilator use, contact your doctor.
- Remember to wash the dilator in hot soapy water and dry thoroughly before putting it away.

Further information

POGP https://thepogp.co.uk/patient_information/default.aspx

Pelvic Pain Support Network <https://www.pelvicpain.org.uk/>

International Pelvic Pain Society

https://www.pelvicpain.org/IPPS/Content/Professional/Patient_Information.aspx

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

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

Jenni Churches (Women's and Men's Health Physiotherapist), January 2021

Next review due: January 2023