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Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

Patient Information Leaflet

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Exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles

What are pelvic floor muscles?

The pelvic floor is a sheet of muscle extending between your legs from the 'tail bone' near your back passage to the pubic bone (below your bladder at the front). It makes up the 'floor' of our pelvis and helps support the bladder, womb and bowel.

The openings to the bladder, vagina and bowels pass through these muscles. Normally, we are unaware of these muscles working. They relax when we want to go to the toilet, and contract to help stabilise our lower body and stop us leaking when we are physically active. They also help us to 'hang on' when we need the toilet.

Why exercise them?

The muscles can become weak as a result of childbirth, straining when constipated, chronic coughing, being overweight, persistent heavy lifting and menopausal changes.

Improvement in pelvic floor muscle strength helps prevent leakage of urine from the bladder, improves bowel control and helps prevent prolapse. Stronger pelvic floor muscles will also help if you suffer heaviness or discomfort in your vagina or have piles. Improving your pelvic floor muscle control may also improve your own, and your partner's enjoyment of sex.

Exercising your pelvic floor muscles after vaginal surgery or childbirth reduces discomfort and swelling and helps healing.

The exercises have no known side-effects. It is recommended that all women practise these exercises daily and throughout life!

References

1. Laycock, J., Standley, A., Crothers, E., Naylor, D., Frank, M., Garside, S., Kiely, E., Knight, S., Pearson, A. (2001) *Clinical Guidelines for the Physiotherapy Management of Females aged 16-65 with Stress Urinary Incontinence*.
2. NICE (2013) Urinary Incontinence: the management of Urinary Incontinence in women (CG171).

For advice about all aspects of incontinence, please contact:

The Continence Advisory Service Tel: 0161 366 2268
Union Street Clinic
Hyde

Other useful information is available from:

The Bladder and Bowel Foundation (B&BF) Tel: 01536 533255
info@bladderandbowelfoundation.org

Bladder and Bowel UK Te: 0161 607 8219

www.disabledliving.co.uk

When you feel the urge to empty your bladder try the following delaying techniques:

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles
- Sit on something hard, e.g. a chair arm
- Distract your mind

Bowel Urgency: If you have to rush to the toilet to open your bowels, you can try using the exercises to help you 'hang on'. Practising this should help you regain bowel control.

Additional Tips

- Trying to get down to your correct weight reduces the strain on the pelvic floor muscles and can make a considerable improvement to your symptoms.
- Straining when you open your bowels stretches and weakens your pelvic floor muscles. Make sure you are eating a healthy balanced diet and have an adequate fluid intake. If you still have problems seek help from your GP.
- Lifting puts strain on your pelvic floor. Remember to tighten your pelvic floor before you lift and try to hold it tight until you have lowered the load.
- If you attend fitness training or go to the gym, remember to take care with activities that increase abdominal pressure, e.g. sit ups, or any activity with 'high impact' such as trampolining. These type of activities may put your pelvic floor at risk of becoming weaker. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles prior to such exercises, and seek specialist instruction. If in doubt, avoid these activities altogether.

How to do the exercises

Get yourself into a comfortable position (sitting, standing or lying down).

Start by breathing out; then draw up the front and back passages as strongly and intensively as you can. Now relax and let go. It may help to imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine. The feeling is like a 'squeeze and lift' sensation. This is a pelvic floor contraction.

Remember to try **not** to hold your breath, or squeeze your legs or tighten your buttocks. Start gently and stop if it hurts.

The feeling of doing the exercise can also be described as "lift doors closing and the lift going up to the top floor" **or** tightening up as if you are trying to stop wind or prevent a tampon from slipping out.

You can examine yourself to check if you are doing the exercises correctly.

- Use a mirror to see your vagina 'squeeze and draw up'
- Next time you are in the bath, put your right thumb inside your vagina and feel **downwards and to the left**. Try a contraction and see if you can feel the muscles tense. Now try a contraction with your left thumb feeling the muscles on the right hand side.

Now try these...

1. Briskly contract your muscles as strongly as you can and see how many seconds you can **hold** the contraction for. Aim for a maximum of 10 seconds. Try to lift a little higher with each second counted. Release and rest for 4 or 5 seconds. How many times can you repeat this 'contract, hold and release pattern? ...times.
2. Next see if you can contract your pelvic floor briskly and strongly and then immediately let go. Aim for a maximum of 10 How many times can you repeat these? ...times. These are called 'quick' or fast contractions and help your muscles respond quickly, especially useful to prevent leakage of urine when you cough or sneeze!

Both these types of exercises are important in training and improving pelvic floor muscle function. Try to perform these exercises 3 times a day every day. No-one can tell you are doing them! You can exercise in any position, standing up, lying down or sitting in a chair. Try them all out and see which position suits you best.

If you can exercise more often, so much the better ... see if you can do the routine 5 times day or every 2 hours. Make sure you rest for at least 4 seconds between each contraction to prevent tiring of the muscles.

The exercises are not difficult, but they do need practising regularly and they are often forgotten if you lead a busy life! Think of ways to remind yourself to do your exercises...every time you wash your hands, listen to a news bulletin, feed the baby, stop at a red traffic light, queue for the checkout at the supermarket, after passing urine. Reminders and apps eg Squeezy, can also be used to help your exercise routine.

3.

Eventually:

You will notice your pelvic floor awareness improve. You will also find that you can hold each contraction for longer and repeat more times. By increasing the exercises in this way, your muscles will become stronger.

Try to aim for 10 contractions holding each one for 10 seconds followed by 10 quick contractions, at least three times a day.

As with any muscle training, it takes time to build up strength and improve your muscle function. Don't expect to notice an instant improvement; it may take **3-6 months** of regular exercises to see a difference in symptoms.

If you have been doing these exercises and your symptoms persist, **do** contact your doctor, continence advisor or physiotherapist, as other treatment options are available.

Other Advice

Liquid intake: Drink approximately 6-8 drinks a day (1-2 litres or 3-4 pints). Water is best. Avoid caffeine (tea, coffee or cola) artificial sweeteners and fizzy drinks. Be aware that restricting your fluid intake can make the urine concentrated and could make symptoms worse.

Sudden Movements: Try to tighten and hold the pelvic floor muscles prior to coughing, sneezing and lifting. This will prevent muscle weakening, improve your control and reduce leakage of urine or faeces.

Emptying your bladder: Try to completely empty the bladder. Do not exercise your muscles, or bear down...instead just relax. Try to avoid visiting the toilet too frequently, as this can reduce bladder capacity. Try to train your bladder to wait a bit longer.