

Pelvic Floor Exercises for Women

Introduction

Physiotherapists, doctors and nurses know that exercising the pelvic floor muscles can help you to improve your bladder control. When done correctly, these exercises can build up and strengthen these muscles and so help you to control your bladder and bowel.

What is the Pelvic Floor?

The pelvic floor consists of layers of muscle and ligaments that stretch from the pubic bone to the end of the backbone (coccyx) and from side to side (see diagram). Firm, supportive pelvic floor muscles help support the bladder, womb and bowel, and to close the bladder outlet and back passage.

How does the Pelvic Floor work?

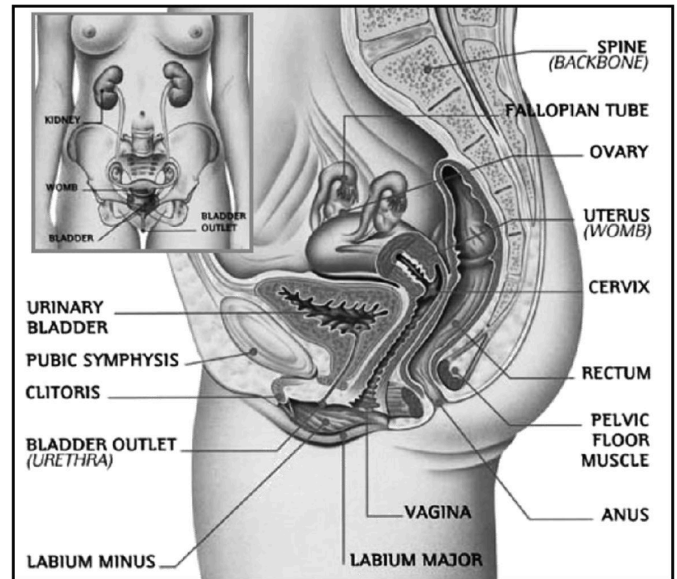
The muscles of the pelvic floor are kept firm and slightly tense to stop leakage of urine from the bladder and wind or faeces from the bowel. When you pass water or have a bowel motion the pelvic floor muscles relax. Afterwards, they tighten again to restore control. The muscles actively squeeze when you laugh, cough, lift or sneeze to help prevent any leakage. They also have an important sexual function, helping to increase sexual awareness for both yourself and your partner during intercourse.

How can exercising the Pelvic Floor Muscles help?

Exercising the pelvic floor muscles can strengthen them so they give the correct support. This will improve your bladder control and improve or stop leakage of urine. Like any other muscles in the body, the more you use and exercise them, the stronger the pelvic floor muscles will be.

Finding your Pelvic Floor Muscles

It is not always easy to find your pelvic floor muscles. Exercising them should not show at all 'on the outside'. You should not pull in your tummy excessively, squeeze your legs together, tighten your buttocks or hold your breath!



Here is what to do:

Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart or lay on your bed. Now imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind from the bowel. To do this you must squeeze the muscles around the back passage. Try squeezing and lifting that muscle as if you really do have wind. You should be able to feel the muscle move. Your buttocks and legs should not move at all. You should be aware of the skin around the back passage tightening and being pulled up and away from your chair. Really try to feel this squeezing and lifting.

Now imagine you are sitting on the toilet passing urine. Picture yourself trying to stop the stream of urine. You should be using the same group of muscles that you used before, but don't be surprised if you find this harder. (Do not try to stop the stream when you are actually passing water as this may, if repeated, cause problems with correct emptying).

Now try to tighten the muscles around your back passage, vagina and front passage and lift up inside as if trying to stop passing wind and urine at the same time.

It is very easy to bring other incorrect muscles into play, so try to isolate your pelvic floor as much as possible by not squeezing your legs together, not tightening your buttocks and not holding your breath.

The lower tummy can very gently be drawn in as if pulling away from the zip of tight trousers. In this way most of the effort should be coming from the pelvic floor muscles.

Practicing your exercises

Now you can find your pelvic floor muscles, here are the exercises to do:

1. Your pelvic floor muscles need to have stamina. So sit, stand or lie with your knees slightly apart. Slowly tighten and pull up the pelvic floor muscles as hard as you can. Try lifting and squeezing them as long as you can. Rest for 4 seconds and then repeat the contraction. Build up your strength until you can do 10 slow contractions at a time, holding them for 10 seconds each with rests of 4 seconds in between.
2. Your pelvic floor muscles also need to react quickly to sudden stresses from coughing, laughing or exercise that puts pressure on the bladder. So practise some quick contractions, drawing in the pelvic floor and holding it for just one second before relaxing. Try to achieve a strong muscle tightening with up to ten quick contractions in succession.

Aim to do a set of slow contractions (exercise 1) followed by a set of quick contractions (exercise 2) at least 3 times each day.

It takes time for exercise to make muscles stronger. You are unlikely to notice any improvement for several weeks, so stick at it! You will need to exercise regularly for at least 3 months before the muscles gain their full strength.

Tips to help you

Get into the habit of doing your exercises during normal day to day activities. For example, whilst cleaning your teeth or waiting for a kettle to boil.

If you are unsure that you are exercising the right muscles, put your thumb into the vagina and try the exercises to check. You should feel a gentle squeeze as the pelvic floor muscle contracts.

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles when you feel you might be about to leak; pull up the muscles before you

cough, laugh, sneeze or lift anything heavy. Your control will gradually improve.

Drink normally, about 6-8 large glasses of fluid a day, avoiding caffeine if you can. Water is best! And don't get into the habit of going to the toilet 'just in case'. Go only when you feel your bladder is full.

Watch your weight; extra weight puts extra strain on your pelvic floor muscles.

Once you have regained control of your bladder, don't forget your pelvic floor muscles. Continue to do your pelvic floor exercises a few times each day to ensure that the problem does not come back.

Remember, you can exercise your pelvic floor muscles wherever you are, nobody will know what you are doing!

Do you have any questions?

This information sheet is designed to teach you how to control your bladder, so that you'll be dry and comfortable. If you have problems doing the exercises, or if you don't understand any part of this information sheet, ask your doctor, nurse, continence advisor or specialist continence physiotherapist for help.

Do your pelvic floor muscle exercises every single day. Have faith in them. You should begin to see results in a few weeks if you are exercising correctly, but don't stop them; make the exercises a permanent part of your daily life.

Pelvic Floor exercises for Men

Men have the same sling of pelvic floor muscles as women, and if they have 'weak bladders' (particularly after treatment for an enlarged prostate) they too can benefit from pelvic floor muscle exercises. Contact Bladder & Bowel Community for a factsheet on 'Pelvic floor exercises for men'.

Updated May 2022



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