

INFORMATION FOR
WOMEN OF ALL AGES

Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

*How to exercise and strengthen
your pelvic floor muscles*



ASSOCIATION OF CHARTERED PHYSIOTHERAPISTS IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

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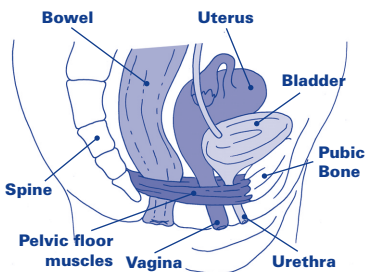
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Introduction

Many women experience pelvic floor problems at some time during their life. But did you know that problems with your pelvic floor muscles can affect your bladder, bowel and sexual function?

Your pelvic floor muscles span the base of your pelvis to keep your pelvic organs in the correct position (prevent prolapse), tightly close your

bladder and bowel (stop urinary or anal incontinence), and help with sex. Your pelvic floor muscles need to be strong, but they also need to work in the right way at the right time. Even women who already do pelvic floor muscle exercises may find that they have symptoms.



Causes

There are many possible causes of pelvic floor muscle problems. These problems may be linked to pregnancy, childbirth or the menopause and can be made worse by such things as being overweight, smoking or being constipated.

Symptoms

Symptoms may include:

- urinary leakage during activities such as coughing, laughing, sneezing or during sporting activity
- a sudden feeling that you need to rush to the toilet, or leaking on the way to the toilet
- anal incontinence which is leakage of stool (faeces) or difficulty in controlling wind
- a prolapse which may be felt as general pelvic discomfort or as 'something coming down'
- reduced sensation and satisfaction during sex, or leakage of urine during sex

Many people think that these symptoms are all part of old age, but they can happen to any woman at any time of her life.

Working your pelvic floor muscles

It is important that you get the right muscles working in the right way. To do your exercises, imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing urine and at the same time trying to stop yourself from passing wind. You could also think of squeezing tightly inside your vagina. You should feel your muscles 'lift and squeeze'.

There are three main ways to check if you are contracting your pelvic floor muscles correctly:

- use a small mirror to look at the area between your legs. The skin between your vagina and back passage should move up and inwards away from the mirror when you contract your pelvic floor muscles. If you see any bulging – STOP! This could cause more problems: for more advice you should see a specialist physiotherapist
- feel inside your vagina with your thumb or index finger. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles. You should feel the muscles tightening around your thumb or finger
- if you are sexually active, you could try to squeeze your muscles during sex. Ask if your partner can feel the squeeze

It is important to breathe normally when you are doing your exercises. You may also feel some gentle tightening in your lower abdominal muscles. This is normal.

Your pelvic floor muscle exercise programme

You need to practise short squeezes as well as long squeezes.

Long squeezes

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles, hold for several seconds, and then relax for several seconds. How long can you hold?
- Repeat until your muscles get tired. How many times can you repeat your long squeezes?

Short squeezes

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles for one second, and then relax. Repeat until your muscles get tired. How many times can you repeat your short squeezes?

You should do your pelvic floor muscle exercises at least 3 times each day. You may find it easier to start your programme when you are sitting or lying down.

As your muscles improve, aim to do your exercises in other positions such as standing up.

Improving your pelvic floor muscles

Most women need to aim for 10 long squeezes, up to 10 seconds each, followed by 10 short squeezes. For some women this will be too easy, for others this may be too difficult. Start with what you feel is a comfortable length of time for you to squeeze. Gradually increase it over the next few weeks.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises are not a 'quick fix'. It is important that you continue with your exercises even if they do not seem to be helping.

If you practise your pelvic floor muscle exercises as above, you should notice an improvement in 3-5 months.

Further advice is available from a specialist physiotherapist.

Remembering to exercise

It is easy to forget your pelvic floor muscle exercises. Make sure your exercises are part of your daily routine - just like brushing your teeth. You should continue with your exercises for the rest of your life.

Here are some suggestions to help you to remember:

- Use coloured stickers or reminder notes around the house or at work
- Do your exercises after you have emptied your bladder. Do not practise stopping your flow of urine mid-stream.
- Use the advert break between television programmes

Preventing problems

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you do anything that may put them under pressure, such as lifting, coughing or sneezing.

Being overweight puts extra strain on your pelvic floor muscles. Your symptoms may improve if you lose weight. Straining to empty your bowels (constipation) may also weaken your pelvic floor muscles. If you are often constipated, you may need to seek advice.

Getting help

If you have any difficulty with the exercises described in this leaflet, or find that you are not improving you may need extra help. Chartered Physiotherapists in Women's Health are experts in pelvic floor muscle rehabilitation.

To find your nearest specialist continence physiotherapist ask your local physiotherapy department or contact:

ACPWH Administration, Fitwise Management Ltd,
Drumcross Hall, Bathgate, West Lothian EH48 4JT

T: 01506 811077 **E:** info@fitwise.co.uk

or visit the ACPWH website at [**www.acpwh.org.uk**](http://www.acpwh.org.uk)

The ACPWH also produce other leaflets, details of which are available on the website.

