

Pelvic floor muscle problems: don't suffer in silence

Physiotherapy Service Patient information

One in ten people in this country have problems with their bladder or bowels. These problems can be very embarrassing and distressing. 50% of women over the age of 50 have signs of vaginal prolapse.

This information sheet is for women who have problems as a result of weak pelvic floor muscles and for people who wish to make their muscles stronger. If this information does not help you, tell your doctor. There may be other treatments which could help or cure your problem.

What do my pelvic floor muscles do?

Your pelvic floor muscles support the bladder, vagina, womb and the bowel. They help to control when you pass urine and empty your bowels. The muscles should be firm and strong. If they are weak, they will not provide the support and control that they should. Weak muscles can cause urine leakage, reduced bowel control and decreased sensation during intercourse.

Why have my muscles become weak?

The muscles can be damaged in many ways, e.g. pregnancy and childbirth, prolonged straining to empty your bowel, a persistent cough, lack of exercise, the menopause, increasing age, and too much heavy lifting.

How can exercising the pelvic floor muscles help?

Exercising the muscles can strengthen them so that they once again give support.

How can I find my pelvic floor muscles?

- Choose any comfortable position, with your knees slightly apart
- Tighten up your back passage as though you are trying to stop passing wind
- Then also tighten the muscles that you would use to stop yourself from passing urine
- Do these two actions together and you should be exercising your pelvic floor muscles

It is easy to use the wrong muscles instead of the pelvic floor muscles

It is very important to make sure that you are using the right muscles; otherwise your problem may not improve. Don't clench your buttocks, squeeze your legs together or hold your breath.

If you are not sure if you're doing the exercises correctly or if your problems don't improve, tell your doctor and ask for help from a specialist physiotherapist or nurse.

Here are a few ways you can check that you are doing the exercises properly:

- Put your fingers just inside the vagina. Tighten the muscles. You should feel the muscles firm up/move around your fingers.
- Hold a small mirror so you can see the back passage (anus) and vagina. Tighten the pelvic floor muscles. The back passage should draw in a little ('pucker').
- When you have sex, squeeze your pelvic floor muscles and see if you can feel yourself tightening.
- Tighten the muscles when you are passing urine to stop the flow, towards the end. **Only ever do this infrequently** just to make sure that you know how to use the pelvic floor muscles. If you do this more often, it may lead to bladder infections.

Practising your exercises

You can practise the exercises sitting, lying or **standing**. Do them slowly and fast:

Slow exercises

Gradually tighten the muscles and try to hold for up to a count of 10 seconds. This helps the muscles to support your bladder and bowel.

Fast exercises

Tighten and relax the muscles quickly. This helps the muscles to stop the urine leaking when you sneeze, laugh or exercise.

Build up to doing eight slow exercises and eight fast exercises three times each day.

How will I know if the exercises are working?

You would expect to have fewer leaks and other symptom improvement after about three months of exercising. Continue your pelvic floor exercises a few times each day to make sure that the problem does not come back. Get help if there is no improvement after three months.

How will I remember to do the exercises?

- Get into the habit of doing your exercises with things you do regularly, e.g. every time you have **finished** passing urine, stand in a queue, or wash your hands.
- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you lift or move a load, cough, laugh or sneeze. This can prevent a leakage of urine. You will get better at this with practice.

How can I progress my exercises?

Try these exercises in standing as this is a harder position: contract and work your muscles, increase the repetitions and aim for a good quality contraction. Continue your exercises until you feel the muscles tiring.

Look after your bladder and bowels:

- Have at least eight drinks every day.
- Avoid caffeine and fizzy drinks.
- Don't go to the toilet too often. Only go when your bladder feels full.
- Try to keep a normal weight; extra weight puts a strain on your pelvic floor muscles.
- Eat five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. This can stop you getting constipated.

Pelvic floor exercises for men

Men have a pelvic floor too. They can have difficulties and may benefit from help. The Bladder and Bowel Foundation has a leaflet especially for them (see link below).

Other help and information can be found at The Bladder and Bowel Foundation:

www.bladderandbowel.org

Useful apps: **Squeezyapp.co.uk**

Pelvicfloorfirst.au.com

Contact details

Therapy Services Poole: **0300 019 2121**

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