

Your Pelvic Floor

Explained

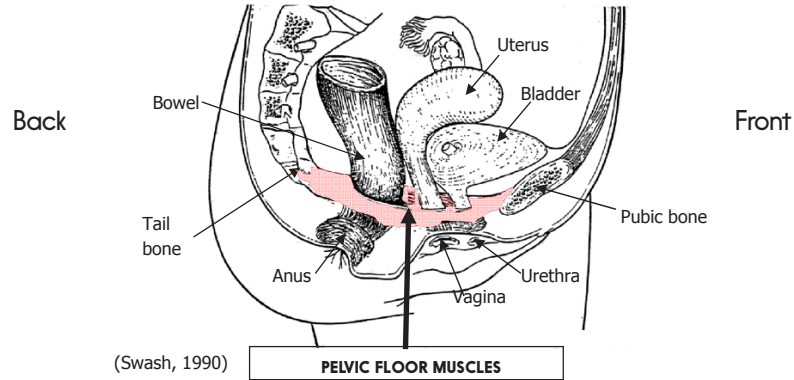


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This leaflet tells you about how your pelvic floor works and why it becomes weak. It also tells you how to do pelvic floor exercises and gives you other pelvic floor advice.


What is my Pelvic Floor?



The pelvic floor is a sling of flat muscles that attach to the pubic bone at the front and to the tail bone at the back. These muscles form the floor of the pelvis, that is why it is called the 'pelvic floor'. You may hear the term 'Levator ani' which also describes the pelvic floor.

What does my Pelvic Floor do?

The pelvic floor has many important roles that are explained below:

Supports baby during pregnancy	 <p>Pelvic Floor</p>	Relaxes during labour to allow delivery of baby
Supports bladder, uterus (womb), vagina and bowel by lifting them inside the pelvis to prevent PROLAPSE		Helps to hold onto urine and stools by squeezing our front and back passages closed to prevent INCONTINENCE
Works with our back and tummy muscles to support our core		Increases vaginal sensation and sexual satisfaction

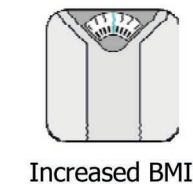
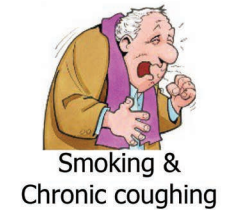
Why your Pelvic Floor weakens

There are many events and activities that cause pelvic floor weakness. They do this by reducing the integrity of our pelvic floor muscle, increasing pelvic floor strain or reducing its nerve supply. Some of these risk factors **cannot** be changed.

Risk factors that cannot be changed



Risk factors that can be changed



What are the symptoms of Pelvic Floor weakness?

Having a weak pelvic floor does not mean that you will have symptoms to begin with. The body may find ways to compensate for pelvic floor weakness, however as we age, this becomes less effective.

Common complaints that indicate pelvic floor weakness include:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Stress urinary incontinence | Leaking urine when coughing, sneezing or during exertion (exercise) |
| Urge urinary incontinence | Being less able to hold on to urine, having to rush to the toilet, and leaking urine along the way |
| Prolapse | Feeling a bulge or like something is 'coming down' inside your vagina |
| Faecal incontinence | Being less able to hold onto wind & stool and having to rush to the toilet |
| Sexual sensation | Feeling less sensation during sexual activity |

How can you make a difference?

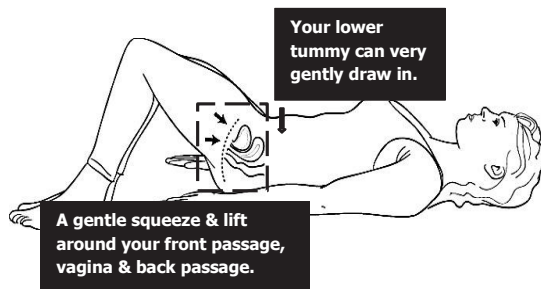
Pelvic floor weakness can be **improved** with **exercises**. **Pelvic floor exercises** can also help to **reduce** the **severity** of your **symptoms**.

Pelvic floor exercises should be a '**healthy habit**'. **Daily pelvic floor exercises** need to be done for **life**.

How do I contract my Pelvic Floor?

When you contract your pelvic floor, it feels like trying to 'hold in your urine and wind'. You should feel a 'squeeze and lift' around your front passage, vagina and back passage.

The lower tummy will also very gently draw in as if pulling away from the zip of tight trousers.



Nobody should be able to tell when you are exercising your pelvic floor. Your bottom thighs and upper tummy muscles should stay relaxed. Also, you should not have to hold your breath when contracting your pelvic floor.

It may take time and concentration to learn to correctly contract your pelvic floor.

Pelvic floor exercises can be performed in:



Crook-lying (easiest)



Side-lying (easiest)



4-point kneeling



Sitting (convenient)



Standing (hardest)

How do I know if I am doing the exercises correctly?

Mirror Hold a mirror so you can see the area between your legs. Tighten your pelvic floor; the skin between your anus and vagina (perineum) should move away from you in the mirror.

Palpation In lying or sitting, place your hand gently on the perineum. You should feel movement away from your hand when you contract your pelvic floor.



Digital palpation Gently insert your index finger into your vagina to feel tightening and around your finger as you contract your pelvic floor.

Sex During sexual intercourse, contract your pelvic floor and ask your partner if they can feel you tightening the muscles.

Avoid stopping urine mid-flow

It can be a helpful prompt to visualise yourself stopping urination over the toilet in order to contract your pelvic floor. However, it is **not advisable** to start and stop urination whilst over the toilet as a way of doing pelvic floor exercises. This is because your bladder may start to retain old urine. This can lead to **bladder and urinary tract infections**.



What are the exercises I need to do?

1. Long Holds for endurance:

Contract your pelvic floor and hold it for up to 10 seconds; relax for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times. If you can't achieve this, then just hold and repeat for as long/many as you can before your muscles get tired. Your muscles may also need longer to rest.



2. Quick Flicks for resisting stress on bladder cause by coughing etc:

Contract your pelvic floor strongly for 1 second, and then relax it immediately. Repeat up to 10 times (rapidly) unless your muscles tire beforehand.

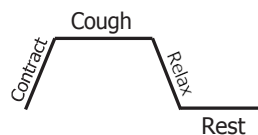


Complete one set of long holds (**exercise 1**) followed by a set of quick flicks (**exercise 2**) at least 3-4 times daily.

It takes time for exercise to strengthen your pelvic floor. You won't notice things getting better for a few weeks, but keep going. **To improve your pelvic floor function, at least 3-6 months of regular pelvic floor exercises are required.**

3. The "Knack":

Contract your pelvic floor before you cough, sneeze or lift & keep your pelvic floor contracted until the event is over. This will help minimise urine leakage and/or the feeling of pelvic heaviness.



Trouble remembering to do your exercises?

Try:

1. Doing your pelvic floor exercises with a particular activity (eg. brushing your teeth, washing your face)
2. Make pelvic floor exercises part of your general exercise routine
3. Set a reminder on your phone or download the NHS 'Squeezy app' to your smart phone



How do I progress my exercises?

Your pelvic floor needs to be **exercised to fatigue** in order to **improve strength**. If you only just managed to complete the last 1-2 repetitions of your exercises, finding them very difficult, then your pelvic floor will gradually build strength.

Finding your exercise programme too easy?

Then alter one of the following:

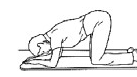
- Increase the amount of time you contract by 1-2 secs
OR
- Decrease the amount of time you rest by 1-2 secs
OR
- Increase the number of repetitions by 1-2
OR
- Try exercising in a different position (i.e. lying to sitting to standing)



Crook-lying (easiest)



Side-lying (easiest)



4-point kneeling



Sitting (convenient)



Standing (hardest)

How do I protect my Pelvic Floor from weakening?

Avoid straining on the toilet (constipation):

- Eat at least 30g of fibre daily to bulk your stool and keep it soft to pass. Eg, wholemeal bread, oats, fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Drink at least 1.5-2L (3-4 pints) of water daily to nourish your body and reduce the risk of constipation.
- If you have issues with straining, have a footrest under your feet and leaning forwards can help you open your bowels easier.
- It is normal to open your bowels **between 3 times a day to 3 times a week.**



Liaise with your GP:

- **Give up smoking:** Smoking causes chronic coughing straining the pelvic floor, as well as the build-up of toxins which don't help the pelvic tissues.
- **Maintain a healthy weight:** Extra abdominal weight places extra pressure on your pelvic floor.
- **Local Oestrogen (Menopausal Women):** If this is a suitable option, increasing oestrogen in the tissues can help improve your pelvic floor integrity by applying a cream to the area.
- **Constipation:** If you are still having issues with straining on the toilet, you may need advice regarding fibre supplements and stool softeners.

Pelvic floor exercises:

- Exercise your pelvic floor muscles regularly to maintain their strength.

How important is it to do my Pelvic Floor exercises?

- **1 in 3 women** will experience incontinence and/or prolapse at some point in their lives.
- Females are more at risk of incontinence/prolapse than males as our pelvic floors and tissues will undergo more weakening due to pregnancy, childbirth and menopause.



It is essential that pelvic floor exercises become routine and are done for life!

What if I can't contract my Pelvic Floor?

A Women's Health physiotherapist specialises in treating Women's Health problems including incontinence, prolapse and pelvic pain. They can help you activate your pelvic floor using verbal instruction, positioning, biofeedback and electrical stimulation as required.

Your gynaecologist or GP will refer you for these services if appropriate.

Common myths about Pelvic Floor and exercises

"It's normal to have a bit of a leak after a baby or with age."

Pregnancy, childbirth and age make women vulnerable to incontinence, but it is not normal. You would not put up with a leaking tap in your house for long.

"My incontinence will resolve on its own."

It is possible to do nothing about incontinence and have it get better on its own. However, incontinence is a symptom of pelvic floor weakness, sometimes your body may compensate temporarily before the symptoms come back.

"I had a caesarean. I don't need to do pelvic floor exercises."

You are still at risk of incontinence and prolapse, as your pelvic floor had to support your growing baby for 9 months, which weakens your pelvic floor. You still need to complete your exercises.

"You need electrical stimulation or vaginal cones to do pelvic floor exercises."

Most women do not need electrical stimulation or vaginal cones to do pelvic floor exercises. However, for some women who are not sure how to contract their muscles, these treatments can be useful.

"I already have a prolapse, pelvic floor exercises will not help me now."

If you have a severe prolapse, your gynaecologist will counsel you on whether pelvic floor exercises will benefit you. Whilst, pelvic floor exercises cannot reverse a prolapse, they may still reduce the severity of your symptoms.

"I can't do pelvic floor exercises straight after giving birth or pelvic surgery."

Gentle pelvic floor exercises can shift swelling and promote healing of your pelvic tissues if you have a perineal tear or surgery. Try a few gentle squeezes. If you have a catheter, then wait until it is removed before you start your exercises.

"Men do not suffer from incontinence."

Males and females **both have a pelvic floor**. Men **can and do** suffer from incontinence, however they are at less risk as their pelvic floors are not subjected to pregnancy, childbirth or menopause.

Useful resources and acknowledgements

Bladder & Bowel Foundation (UK):

Pelvic Floor Exercises for Women. <https://www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org>

Quit 4 You:

Isle of Man Smoking Cessation Service. Quit4You 01624 642404 or email tobacco@gov.im

Weight Loss Advice:

<https://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/Want2LoseWeight.pdf>

NHS Weight Loss Guide:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/weight-loss-guide/Pages/weight-loss-guide.aspx>

This document can be provided in large print
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