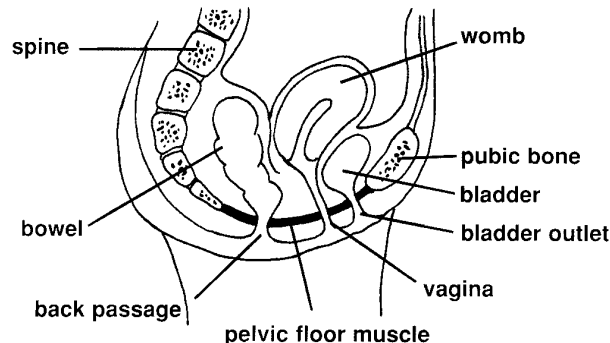


The Pelvic Floor

This leaflet tells you how to exercise and strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. These muscles form a broad platform running from front to back and, as the name suggests, form the floor to the pelvis.



The functions of the pelvic floor muscles are:

- To support the pelvic organs, i.e. the bladder, rectum and in women, the uterus.
- To control continence of urine and faeces from the bladder and bowel and give tone to the vaginal opening.

It is important to maintain strength in these muscles in order to prevent problems occurring, or to increase their strength when problems do occur, for example: damage to the muscles as a result of pregnancy, childbirth, weakness of the muscles as a result of constipation, chronic cough, being overweight, menopausal changes, persistent heavy lifting, long periods of inactivity due to illness, abdominal/pelvic surgery and ageing.

Symptoms – for women

These could be many and varied, for example:

- Leakage of urine, faeces or wind when coughing or with physical activity.
- Urgent and/or frequent need to pass urine.
- Symptoms of a prolapse, e.g. sensation of a vaginal bulge and/or heaviness.
- Decreased satisfaction during intercourse.

The Basic Exercise

You can do this in any position – sitting, lying or standing. However, it is very important you are fully relaxed.

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and, at the same time, trying to stop your flow of urine mid-stream. The feeling is one of “squeeze and lift”, closing and drawing up the front and back passages.

It is important to do this without pulling in your tummy, squeezing your legs together, tightening your bottom or holding your breath!

In other words, only pelvic floor muscles should be working. This is the “secret exercise” – the exercise that no one can see you performing. This is called a “**Pelvic Floor Contraction**”.

The Exercise Programme

It is important that you read through the programme before starting the exercises. You need to first find out what your muscles are able to do. This is your “starting block”. You can then build on this to strengthen the muscles.

Exercise 1 – long, slow squeezes

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles as described above. Hold tight for as many seconds as you can (up to a maximum of 10 seconds).

How long can you hold the squeeze for? **e.g. 2**.....seconds. Now release the contraction and rest for 5-10 seconds.

Repeat the “tighten, hold and release” as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 10 repetitions).

How many times can you repeat the contraction? **e.g. 4**reps

These times become your “starting block”: **e.g. 2**.....Secs **e.g. 4**.....Reps

Repeat your “starting block” as many times as you can throughout the day -every hour if you can! As a result of this muscle training your pelvic floor will get stronger and your starting block will change.

This exercise builds up the endurance of the muscle group. In other words, the muscles will be able to work harder for longer.

Exercise 2 – short, fast squeezes

This exercise builds up the strength of the muscles and helps them react quickly when you cough or sneeze.

Quickly tighten your pelvic floor muscles as firmly as you can. Only hold for ONE second then let go. Repeat this as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 10).

How many quick squeezes can you do?

Your exercise programme should, therefore consist of:

1. Endurance - slow controlled exercises (“starting block”), followed by:
2. Speed - short, quick exercises.

That’s the easy bit! The most difficult part of the programme is remembering to do the exercises. Here are some tips to help trigger your memory:

- Wear your watch on the wrong wrist.
- Put stickers in places that will catch your eye, e.g. by the telephone, fridge, kettle, steering wheel etc.
- Exercise after you have emptied your bladder.

You should practice a set of long, slow squeezes (exercise 1) followed by short, fast squeezes (exercise 2) 5-6 times every day. Gradually the muscles will become stronger and you will be able to hold the squeezes longer and/or do more squeezes in a row. You should change your exercises 1 and 2 to reflect this.

Remember, the muscles will only continue to get stronger if you build up the amount of exercises you can do.

It may take several months before the muscles regain their full strength.

A Test

Once you have regained good control, test the muscles. Make sure that your bladder is nearly full (about three hours after last empty). Stand feet apart, jump or bounce up and down on the spot and cough deeply twice. Even if no leakage occurs, continue the above exercise programme for one more month. Once your pelvic floor muscles are strong, it is important to maintain them. Continue your exercises 2/3 times daily for the rest of your life.

Some questions answered which will help you to achieve your goal:

Does my weight have anything to do with the problem?

Getting down to your correct weight will reduce the amount of strain placed on the pelvic organs and muscles and may make an improvement to your symptoms.

Does what I drink affect my symptoms?

What should you avoid? Certain drinks are best avoided if possible. This includes caffeinated drinks such as coffee, tea, cola and some energy drinks. The caffeine is a bladder irritant so can cause an increase in the number of times you need the toilet and the urgency you feel to empty your bladder. It is also a diuretic so can increase your urine output so causing a greater need to pass urine along with subsequent dehydration. Not only cola but all fizzy/ carbonated drinks also act as a bladder irritant so can add to the problem of an overactive bladder.

I tend to be constipated on occasions and then my symptoms are worse. Why?

Straining forces the bowels open and this stretches the pelvic floor muscles. Check your diet to avoid this problem, or see your GP. It may help to use your hand (wrapped in toilet paper or with a pad) to apply upward pressure to support the area in front of your back passage (anus) to ease your bowel movement.

I sometimes leak when picking up my toddler, or any other weight. Is there anything I can do to stop this happening?

Lifting puts a strain on the pelvic floor. If you do need to lift a heavy object remember to tighten your pelvic floor **before** you lift and hold it tight until you have lowered the load.

Are there any exercises I should avoid?

Straight leg sit-ups and double leg lifts put severe pressure on the pelvic floor (and the back) and should not be done. Also avoid any activity with high impact (anything involving both feet off the ground at the same time).

Remember Liquid Intake

You should drink approximately 3-4 pints of liquid a day – do not restrict your intake, it will not reduce your symptoms. In fact, it could make matters worse.

Frequency of Bladder Emptying

Try to avoid emptying your bladder too frequently as this can reduce its capacity. If you feel that you need to go more often than once every 2 hours, then train your bladder to wait longer. When you feel the urge to empty your bladder soon after having done so, try delaying techniques such as:

- Stand still or sit down.
- Cross your legs.
- Press on your pelvic floor – with your hands or by sitting on a rolled towel/arm of a chair.
- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles – HARD.
- Wait until the urgency passes, 10-20 seconds, then carry on with your activity.
- Keep calm – do not panic.
- Distract yourself – crossword/telephone call, anything!
- Delay going to the toilet, gradually extending the time between voids, up to three hours.
- You are training your bladder to hold MORE urine – 350 ml.
- If you get up in the night to empty your bladder, do not drink after 8.30 pm.

Bladder Emptying

It is important to completely empty the bladder each time you go to the toilet, without straining. Urine left inside the bladder may irritate the bladder lining, causing inflammation. It may help to lean forward as you pass urine.

Sudden Movements

Try to tighten and hold the pelvic floor muscles prior to sneezing, coughing, etc. This will improve your control and reduce leakage of urine.

If problems continue, be prepared to seek further medical advice from either a gynaecologist, urologist or continence advisor.

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