

Exercises for your pelvic floor muscle (women)

Where are the pelvic floor muscles?

The pelvic floor muscles lie across the base of your pelvis to help keep the pelvic organs in the correct position. These include the bladder, uterus, vagina (especially following a hysterectomy) and bowel. The muscles are held in place by ligaments that support the organs, especially when there is an increase of pressure in the abdomen that occurs with lifting, bending, carrying and straining. This is called intra-abdominal pressure; when it increases, the pelvic floor and abdominal muscles brace so that the internal organs such as the uterus and bladder are not pushed downwards.

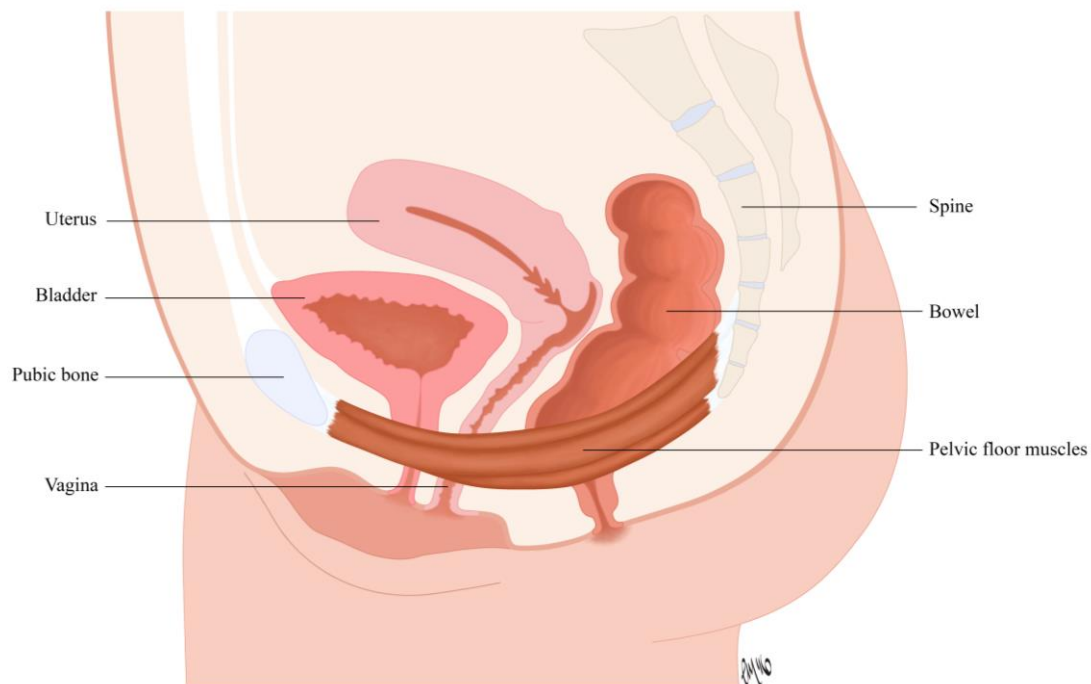


Image reproduced with permission of Pelvic Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy (www.pogp.csp.org.uk), courtesy of Victoria McCulloch, illustrator.

Why are they important?

The pelvic floor muscles work to help keep the bladder and bowel openings closed to prevent unwanted leakage (incontinence) and they relax to allow easy bladder and bowel emptying. Good pelvic floor muscles can help with sex by improving the vaginal sensation and your ability to squeeze during penetration. Your pelvic floor muscles are important in posture and help to support your spine, along with your abdominal muscles.

Not all women with symptoms have weak pelvic floor muscles, but sometimes it's simply about learning to use your pelvic floor muscles at the right time. Pelvic floor muscles should be kept strong and active just like any other muscle in your body. Up to a third of all women experience a problem with their pelvic floor muscles at some time during their life. The most common problems are leaking with activity, sneezing or coughing (stress urinary incontinence) and pelvic organ prolapse (a feeling of something coming down in the vagina).

What can weaken the pelvic floor muscles?

The pelvic floor muscles can be weak, overstretched, slow to work, too tight or torn, just like the other muscles of your body. Below are some examples:

- surgery and cancer treatments, such as radiotherapy
- hormonal changes
- persistent coughing
- pregnancy and childbirth
- regular heavy lifting
- being overweight
- lack of general fitness
- smoking
- ageing
- other conditions such as neurological conditions and diabetes
- high impact exercise.

What are the symptoms of a weak pelvic floor?

Symptoms may occur in the bladder, bowel or vagina. You may have more than one of the following symptoms:

Bladder:

- stress urinary incontinence - leakage with coughing, sneezing and activity (including sexual intercourse)
- urgency - a sudden need to go to the toilet that may include leakage
- frequency - going to the toilet too often
- nocturia - getting up at night to go to the toilet

Bowel:

- anal incontinence - leakage with activity or urge
- difficulty getting or staying clean after bowel movements
- leakage of wind

Vaginal:

- a feeling of something coming down or heaviness (pelvic organ prolapse)



- pain which can be felt vaginally, abdominally or in the pelvic area
- lack of sensation during sex.

Finding your pelvic floor muscles

It is important to get the right muscles working in the right way. In a comfortable lying or sitting position, imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and urine. At the same time, draw the pelvic floor muscles upwards and forwards from the back passage towards the bladder. You may feel a lifting up and tightening as your muscles contract. Try not to hold your breath; breathe in through your nose, drawing air to the bottom of your lungs and letting your tummy relax, then breathe out through your mouth. You could also try counting out loud to encourage normal breathing. Your lower tummy may tighten, which is normal, but keep your buttocks and legs relaxed. Let your pelvic floor muscles relax fully after every contraction.

How do I contract my pelvic floor?

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

1. using a mirror, the area between your vagina and back passage (perineum) should move up and inwards away from the mirror when you contract your pelvic floor muscles. If you see any bulging - **stop**, as you may make your pelvic floor muscle problem worse. If this happens, seek advice from a specialist physiotherapist.
2. 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.
3. if you are sexually active, and having penetrative sex, you could try to squeeze your muscles during sex. Ask if your partner can feel the squeeze. If you experience pain when exercising the pelvic floor muscles, or if you have abdominal or pelvic pain after doing the exercises, you should seek specialist advice from a physiotherapist experienced in treating women with pelvic floor problems.

How do I perform these exercises?

There are two exercises which will help strengthen your pelvic floor. **If you have had surgery, wait until your catheter is removed before starting the exercises.** Once you are familiar and confident with the exercises, you should progress by practising them sitting and then standing. After surgery, you should do the exercises three times a day until you are dry. After that you should continue with these once a day indefinitely.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises (sometimes called Kegels) should include long, held squeezes as well as short, quick squeezes; ensuring that you let the muscle 'go' or 'relax' after each squeeze. You should work the muscles until they tire and do the exercises regularly to help the muscles become stronger and more effective.

Exercise 1 – Slow contractions (the muscles that allow you to decide when you open your bladder or bowels)

- relax your thighs and buttocks
- take a breath in and as you breathe out, squeeze and lift
- try and hold the lift for ten seconds



- make sure you do not hold your breath
- repeat this ten times.

If you find that you can't feel the muscles relax after 10 seconds, this means they have probably already lowered. In this case, you may need to start with a five second hold and build up to ten.

Exercise 2 – Fast contractions (for the muscles you use when cough, laugh or sneeze to avoid leaking)

- relax your thighs and buttocks
- do the squeeze and lift
- do this as strongly as you can and immediately let go
- relax
- repeat this ten times.

Build up your exercise routine gradually over the weeks and months. You should notice an improvement in 3–5 months. After this, keep practising your pelvic floor muscle exercises once a day to maintain the improvement. As your muscles improve, aim to do your exercises in other positions such as standing up. Eventually you can practise using these muscles whilst doing activities such as walking and bending.

How will I remember to do them?

Some people find it helpful to set a reminder on their phone or to use one of the pelvic floor exerciser apps available such as the SqueezyApp© on their phone. The SqueezyApp© is currently priced at £2.99 but may be subject to change.

Alternatively try to do them at the same time as a task, for example:

- every time you switch on the kettle
- after emptying your bladder, whilst sitting on the toilet (but don't practise by stopping your urine flow)
- take a moment to do them when you go to the gym
- during a regular journey in the car, bus or train.

What if I am having chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy following surgery?

If you are having chemotherapy, radiotherapy or brachytherapy then you can still perform the exercises during your treatment and it is important that you continue with these exercises afterwards.

How long do I need to continue these exercises for?

Once you are able to do all of the above exercises easily in standing, you should still do them once a day. This will help you to maintain good core support and your continence in the future. The pelvic floor weakens with age so the exercises should be continued daily indefinitely. If you are still



experiencing problems with incontinence after 12 weeks which does not improve with the exercises, please contact the Clinical Nurse Specialist (key worker) who has been allocated to you.

Keeping physically active

It is really important to be as physically active as you are able to be during and after cancer treatment. If you are leaking urine, you may need to wear a pad, continence washable pants or supportive clothing in order to keep active, and limit high impact activities such as jumping, until your pelvic floor muscles are stronger. If you would like more advice and support in increasing your physical activity, please contact the physiotherapy department.

Other ways to help

All these suggestions are based on best available current evidence.

- **Lifting** - always try to avoid unnecessary strain on your pelvic floor muscles. If you have to lift in your job or daily routine, get advice about safe lifting and equipment to help.
- **'The Knack'** - tighten your pelvic floor muscles before any activity which involves a rise in intra-abdominal pressure - coughing, sneezing, lifting, carrying, bending, even laughing sometimes.
- **Constipation** - see a specialist physiotherapist or ask your doctor if you have difficulty emptying your bowels regularly or always have to strain.
- **Bladder problems** – do not reduce your fluid intake to try and reduce frequency; it may make your urine stronger which might cause more irritation of the bladder. Avoid fizzy and caffeinated drinks. To help with the urgency of needing to go to the toilet, sit down if you can, use your pelvic floor muscles to help the bladder relax, and wait until the strong urge passes.
- **Toileting position** - using a step or stool under your feet while on the toilet helps to create a squatting position which will reduce pressure into your rectum when passing a stool. This will also reduce pressure on the ligaments and muscles in this area. It is important to ensure you always sit and relax on the toilet and not get in a habit of hovering, as this does not allow your pelvic floor to relax completely while you empty your bladder.
- **Relaxation** - having pelvic floor muscles that can relax is just as important as having a strong pelvic floor. Increased stress can cause changes to your posture and breathing. This can put more tension in all your muscles, including your pelvic floor. Practising some mindfulness techniques can help to improving your breathing techniques as well as relax your muscles. There are many apps available online that can help with this. You can also find out more about simple relaxation methods in the POGP booklet on *the Mitchell Method of Relaxation* available online.
- **Exercise** - if you find that you have stress urinary incontinence with exercise, try a low impact activity such as pilates, walking or swimming. You might need to avoid very high impact exercises which involve jumping, heavy weights or prolonged increases in intra-abdominal pressure eg. double leg lifts.
- **Menopause changes** - a mixture of pelvic floor muscle training and using a local vaginal hormonal treatment has been shown to be safe and effective during the menopause.
- **Weight** - if you are overweight, try to lose weight as this may help your symptoms. Seek help from your doctor if you have tried but not succeeded with weight loss.
- **Smoking** - try to give up if you can. Your doctor might be able to refer you to a smoking cessation group.



Contact details

Physiotherapy Department:

Chelsea	020 7808 2821 (answer phone)
Sutton	020 8661 3098 (answer phone)
Clinical Nurse Specialist	020 7808 2294

Other sources of information and support

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP)

Tel: 020 7306 6666

Website: www.csp.org.uk

CSP can provide information on NHS and private physiotherapists with a special interest in cancer care and in women's health. They also produce public information leaflets.

Pelvic, Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy (POGP)

Website: www.thepogp.co.uk

POGP produces information leaflets about women's health issues. Their website also provides a directory of physiotherapists where you can search by speciality and region.

Bladder and Bowel Community

Website: www.bladderandbowel.org

The Bladder and Bowel Community provide support for people living with a bladder or bowel condition. They offer resources including the digital 'just can't wait' toilet card.

Age UK

Tel: 0800 678 1602

Website: www.ageuk.org.uk

Age UK helps local communities and allows you to search for support and services near you, such as exercise classes and home help.

The NHS website

Website: www.nhs.uk/conditions

The NHS website provides an easy-to-use A to Z of health conditions, with clear information for symptoms, conditions and treatments.

The International Urogynecological Association (IUGA)

Website: www.yourpelvicfloor.org

IUGA has first-hand patient stories, videos and tools including a bladder diary.

