

Pelvic Floor Muscle EXERCISES



WOMEN'S HEALTH INFORMATION SERIES

PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLE EXERCISES

Pelvic floor muscles need exercising just as much as other muscles. The muscles help support the pelvic organs – the uterus, bladder and bowel – as well as the three passages leading out of the body – the urethra from the bladder, vagina from the uterus and anus from the bowel.

The floor of the pelvis is made up of layers of muscle and other elastic tissues. It stretches like a firm, supportive hammock from the pubic bone at the front to the tailbone at the back and extends sideways to the bony walls of the pelvis.

The pelvic floor muscle exercises described in this booklet will help to maintain and improve bladder and bowel control, and sexual enjoyment.

THE MUSCLES AT WORK

The pelvic floor muscles form part of the mechanism for closing the back and front passages. These muscles work automatically or can be tensed and relaxed at will, for example when stopping the flow of urine or ‘holding on’, relaxing muscles for a vaginal examination, gripping a partner’s penis during sexual intercourse, or holding back a loose bowel motion.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS OF WEAK MUSCLES

Your pelvic floor muscles can weaken or sag because of:

- pregnancy and childbirth
- consistently straining to empty your bowels (constipation)
- frequent heavy lifting
- being overweight
- change in hormone levels at menopause
- lack of general exercise.

It can cause the following conditions including:

- incontinence – leaking of urine (and sometimes faeces) during exertion such as jogging or tennis, or activities such as coughing, sneezing, lifting, walking, household duties or sex
- vaginal slackness
- a feeling of heaviness, dragging or something falling down
- passing ‘wind’ – gas from the bowel or trapped air from the vagina
- tampons slipping out.

HELPING YOURSELF

Your pelvic floor muscles can be strengthened by starting a short exercise program where the muscles are worked hard each day.

Once you have learnt how to do them, these exercises can be done when you are sitting or standing during everyday activities – driving the car, watching TV, standing in shops. Other people cannot see you doing them.

Strong pelvic floor muscles provide good support for pelvic organs and tighten the vagina after childbirth. If you are pregnant, these exercises help your body to cope with the weight of the growing baby.

As you grow older, it is important to exercise your pelvic floor and maintain its strength. At menopause, muscles may change and weaken. The stronger they are before this process begins the better.

Healthy exercised muscles are easier to control and relax during childbirth. They will also regain strength more quickly after the birth. If exercises are not done, the muscles remain stretched after the birth and become further weakened when you resume lifting and straining activities, or vigorous sport.

You can feel the muscles working and test their strength yourself. Place one or two fingers in your vagina, then squeeze and grip the fingers using your pelvic muscles. Strong muscles will produce a squeezing and drawing-up effect around the sides and underneath your fingers in the lower half of the vagina.

EXERCISES

The muscles will only become stronger if they are exercised accurately and strongly, and should only take a few minutes each day.

1. Sit forward on your chair and place your feet and knees wide apart. Place your elbows on your knees and lean forward. Keep your back straight.
2. Imagine that you want to stop the flow of urine or passing wind. Don't hold your breath as you lift your pelvic floor up and in. You should not bear down or feel any downward movement as you do a contraction.
3. Hold the contraction for up to five seconds then relax completely and rest for ten seconds.
4. Repeat this pattern until your muscles feel tired – usually between five and ten repetitions.

Persistence is essential, and by following a pattern of exercises at least twice a day you should notice some improvement within six weeks.

You can also table your progress and mark your improvement by making a chart of how long you can hold the exercise for and how many you can do.

If you leak urine and/or faeces or cannot feel the muscles working correctly, contact a women's health physiotherapist who will be able to check whether you need alternative treatment.

MAINTAINING STRONG PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

The following points can assist you to maintain strong pelvic floor muscles:

- It is important to do pelvic floor muscle exercises after childbirth and during menopause.
- Keep your weight under control by eating a nutritious, high-fibre diet and drinking plenty of fluids.
- Share heavy loads.
- Exercise daily – brisk walking will do. Weight-bearing exercises like walking also help to strengthen bones therefore preventing osteoporosis.

Further information and assistance

Your Women's Health Physiotherapist

Your nearest Women's Health Centre

King Edward Memorial Hospital

Physiotherapy (Subiaco)

Telephone: (08) 9340 2790

HealthDirect

Freecall: 1800 022 222

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