

Pelvic Floor Exercises

Physiotherapy Department



Patient information leaflet

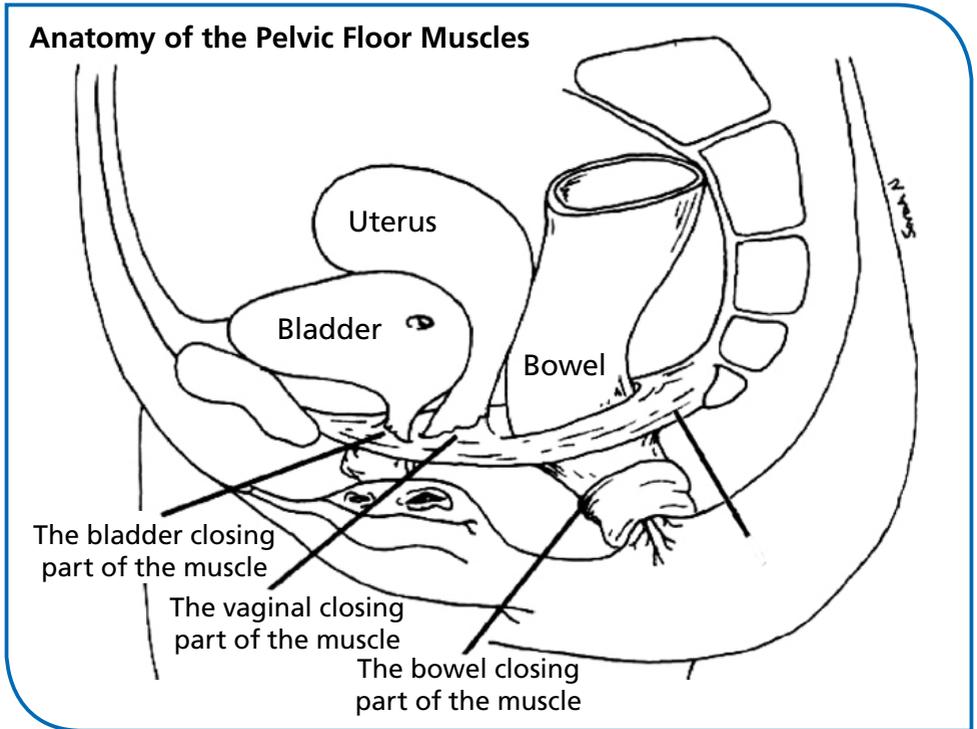
Up to a third of women experience a problem with their pelvic floor muscles at some point during their life. The muscles can be weak, overstretched, tight, or injured during childbirth.

Problems with the pelvic floor can lead to a variety of symptoms. The most common problems are urinary leakage (incontinence) and a feeling of something coming down in the vagina (pelvic organ prolapse).

Bladder symptoms can include leakage with activity (coughing, sneezing, exercise or laughing) urinary urgency (rushing to get to the toilet on time), leakage on the way to the toilet, and needing to empty the bladder frequently (at night, and during the day). Some women also experience problems with bowel control. This may be urgency to open the bowels, leakage of wind or stools, or difficulty wiping after a bowel movement. In addition, some women may experience other symptoms such as heaviness or a bulge in the vagina, and decreased sensitivity during sexual intercourse.

Improving the strength of the pelvic floor muscles improves bladder and bowel symptoms. Pelvic floor muscles need to be exercised in order to strengthen, just like any other muscle in the body.

Anatomy of the Pelvic Floor Muscles



Pelvic floor muscles

The pelvic floor muscles stretch from the front to the back of the pelvis and from side to side. They continually work to support the bladder, uterus (womb) and bowel, keeping them in place.

The pelvic floor muscles also circle around the opening of the bladder (urethra), the opening to the uterus (vagina) and opening to the bowel (anus). This muscle arrangement enables the muscles to control the output of urine, wind or faeces. When you pass urine or have a bowel motion the pelvic floor muscles relax. Afterwards, they tighten again to restore control.

Some activities put extra stress on the pelvic floor as there is an increase in pressure in the abdomen during activities such as coughing, sneezing, lifting, exercise and laughing. This increase in abdominal pressure has to be matched by pressure from the pelvic floor muscles to keep the organs in the right position and to maintain closure of the urethra and anus. This pressure created by the pelvic floor muscles comes from the strength of the pelvic floor muscles.

Why do problems occur with the pelvic floor?

Different women have problems with their pelvic floor for different reasons. Sometimes it is possible to identify one cause but, more often, a combination of factors cause symptoms.

Factors that may cause problems with pelvic floor muscles:

- The natural aging process
- Being overweight
- The menopause
- Chronic constipation and straining
- Repetitive heavy lifting
- Pregnancy and childbirth
- High impact exercise
- Pelvic surgery
- Chest conditions (such as chronic cough, asthma and COPD)
- Other medical conditions (such as Multiple Sclerosis, Joint Hypermobility Syndrome or Diabetes)

Why do pelvic floor exercises?

There are many causes for pelvic floor dysfunction but the main treatment is pelvic floor exercises.

Doing pelvic floor exercises regularly strengthens and tightens the muscles so they can support the internal organs and improve bladder and bowel control. This, in turn, will improve your symptoms.

In addition, a strong pelvic floor assists with the delivery of the baby during childbirth. And, if you require gynaecological surgery, doing these exercises will help the success of your operation and protect it afterwards.

Like any other muscles in the body, the more you use and exercise them, the stronger the pelvic floor muscles will be.

The basic pelvic floor exercise

Pelvic floor exercises can be done in any position. Many women find it easiest to start in a lying down position. Once the muscle is getting stronger you could progress to sitting and standing. However, everyone is different. Try a variety of positions and see what suits you best.

The basic technique is to imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and urine. Try squeezing the anus first, as if holding in wind, then move forward so that you feel the vagina lifting upwards and inwards, and then, finally, squeezing at the front as if you are stopping yourself from passing urine. Some people find it helpful to imagine a zipping sensation – zipping up from back to front. The feeling is generally one of squeezing and lifting, or tightening and pulling up.

Your abdomen may move inwards slightly but try not to pull in excessively. In addition, try not to squeeze your legs together, tighten your buttocks or hold your breath! Many people try very hard to squeeze their pelvic floor muscles and find they cannot help but involve all the surrounding muscle groups. If this is the case, try to be satisfied with the weaker feeling you get when you are just using the pelvic floor. The exercises will feel weaker initially but you are truly isolating the correct muscles, and that is the only way to make them stronger.

If you are unsure that you are exercising the right muscles, put your thumb into the vagina and try the exercises to check. You should feel a gentle squeeze and lift as the pelvic floor muscle contracts.

There are two exercises that work the pelvic floor muscles in slightly different ways. However, it is important to do both exercises for full muscle strengthening.

1) Slow exercise

Tighten and pull up the pelvic floor muscles. Hold for as long as you can, then let go until you have fully relaxed. Rest for a few seconds and lift again.

Start with what is comfortable and realistic for you and exercise at this level. Over time, progress until you can hold for 10 seconds, and repeat 10 times.

This exercise works the endurance of the pelvic floor that supports the bladder, uterus and bowel so can help with prolapse symptoms. It also helps you to get to the toilet when you urgently need to go.

2) Quick exercise

Pull up your pelvic floor muscles quickly and tightly, as strongly as you can and then relax fully. Repeat as many times as you feel a strong contraction, but stop if it starts to tire. You should then exercise at this level. Over time, progress until you can manage 10, with the last contraction as strong as the first.

This exercise works to prevent stress incontinence (leakage on coughing, sneezing or laughing).

How many exercises should I do?

Aim for at least 3 sets of pelvic floor exercises every day. Each time you do a set of pelvic floor exercises you should do both slow and quick exercises.

As the muscles get stronger you will find that you can hold for longer and manage more repetitions. Everybody has a different starting point and it is part of your rehabilitation to feel how long you can hold for, and how many times you can repeat. As time goes on, and the muscles strengthen, you will be able to do more and more. The pelvic floor muscles are just like any other muscle in your body. The more you exercise, the stronger it gets. Eventually, you should aim to be able to manage a 10 second hold, repeated 10 times, followed by 10 quick exercises.

It is important to remember that strengthening a muscle takes time. You are unlikely to notice improvements straight away. Therefore you will need to exercise for at least 3 months before the muscles regain their full strength. Then you need to continue exercising them to maintain this improvement – for life.

Many women find they need a trigger to help them remember their exercises. These can involve daily activities (such as when brushing teeth, during a regular journey by car, bus or train, waiting for the kettle to boil or when on the telephone). There are also many apps available. The NHS app is called Squeezy. Please see www.squeezyapp.co.uk for details.

Remember nobody can see you doing your exercises and you can do them anywhere.

The Knack

You can use your pelvic floor muscles to minimise urinary leakage during your everyday activities. If you are about to cough, laugh, sneeze, or do anything that puts pressure on your bladder, pull up your pelvic floor muscles beforehand. Keep your muscles contracted, throughout the activity, to minimise any leakage of urine. Relax the muscles again once the activity is over.

Reference source(s)

- Pelvic Obstetric and gynaecological physiotherapy
www.pogp.org.uk
Telephone: 0207 306 6666
- Bladder and Bowel Foundation
www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org
Helpline: 0845 345 0165

Physiotherapy contact details

For further information, please do not hesitate to contact:

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PALS and Advocacy contact details

Contact details of independent advocacy services can be provided by our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who are located on the right hand side as you enter the main reception area. PALS are also your first point of contact for health related issues, questions or concerns surrounding RSCH patient services.

Telephone: 01483 402757

Email: rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net

Opening hours: 9.00am–3.00pm, Monday to Friday

If you would like information documents in large print, on tape or in another language or form please contact PALS.

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