

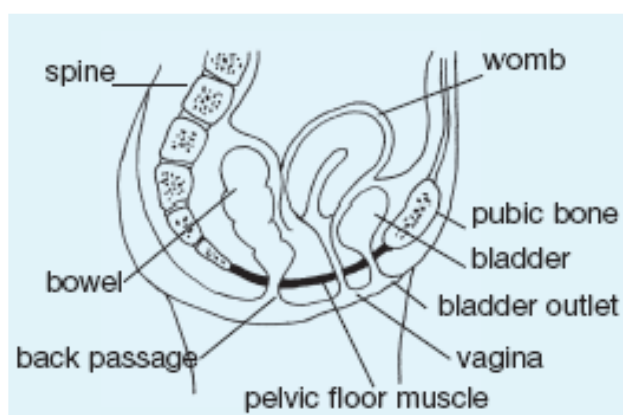


Understanding pelvic floor muscle exercises for women

This factsheet explains why you need to exercise your pelvic floor muscles and how to do the exercises.

What and where are the pelvic floor muscles?

The pelvic floor is a broad sling of muscle which stretches like a hammock from the pubic bone in the front, to the bottom of the spine at the back.



What does the pelvic floor do?

These firm supportive muscles help to hold the bladder, womb, vaginal walls and bowel in place. They close the bladder outlet (urethra) and the back passage (anus) to prevent leaking of urine, faeces and wind/gas (flatus). The pelvic floor also plays a role in improving sensation and orgasm during sexual intercourse.

Why exercise the pelvic floor?

It is important to maintain the strength of these muscles to prevent problems occurring, or to increase their strength if problems happen.

These muscles can become stretched or weak because of the following:

- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Constipation
- Chronic cough
- Being overweight
- Repetitive heavy lifting
- Lack of general fitness
- Pelvic surgery
- Neurological damage (e.g. after a stroke or spinal injury) and ageing

Symptoms of weak and/or stretched pelvic floor muscles

These can be many and varied, for example:

- Urgent and/or frequent need to pass urine
- Leakage of urine when you cough, sneeze, jump, laugh or move
- Accidental leakage of faeces or wind from the anus
- Pelvic organ prolapse (lump and/or aching and a 'coming down' sensation in the vagina)
- Reduced satisfaction during intercourse

Exercises

Pelvic floor muscles need to be exercised just like any other weak or damaged muscle in the body. The following exercises will help to maintain or improve their strength.

Basic exercise

You can do this in any position, sitting, lying or standing, however it is very important that you are fully relaxed. Tighten and lift your pelvic floor, closing and drawing up the back passage, vagina and urinary passage, as if trying to stop yourself passing wind, gripping the vaginal walls together and stopping the flow of urine at the same time. The pelvic floor muscles should move upwards and forwards toward the pubic bone.

It is important to do this without:

- Squeezing your legs together
- Tightening your bottom
- Holding your breath
- Pulling in your tummy strongly

In other words, only your pelvic floor muscles should be working. Your stomach may pull in very gently, but not so that someone would notice you doing the exercise. This is like secretly exercising.

How much do I need to exercise to make the muscle stronger?

Your muscle works all day long, but also has to react quickly, e.g. when you cough and sneeze, so there are two types of exercises. You need to do both exercises for the muscle to work best.

Slow controlled exercise – for strength and endurance

Tighten your pelvic floor muscle and hold tight for as many seconds as you can (up to a maximum of 10 seconds). Relax for the same amount of seconds.

How long can you hold tight in seconds?

Repeat the exercise (up to a maximum of 10 times).

How many times can you repeat it?

Short, quick exercise – for speed

Tighten and lift the pelvic floor muscle as fast as you can to reach your best contraction, then immediately relax the muscle until it is fully at rest (relax for four to five seconds). Repeat the exercise up to a maximum of 10 times.

How many quick contractions can you do?

The figures in these boxes are your baseline. As you feel your muscles getting stronger, increase the amount you do. You should aim to do exercises four to six times a day. If you do less than 40 individual exercises a day you are unlikely to make the muscle stronger. It may take two months to notice results and three to six months for the best results.

Keep it up, it will be worth it. Make it a habit.

The most difficult bit is remembering to do the exercises, so here are some tips:

- Set alarms on your phone
- Exercise after you have emptied your bladder
- Link the exercise to something you do every day, for example, brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, waking and when going to sleep
- Put a few reminder stickers in places that will catch your eye, e.g. on the TV, bathroom mirror or near the kitchen sink
- Invest in a mobile app, for example, “Squeezy”- the NHS physiotherapy app

Once the muscles are strong it is important to maintain them. Remember the exercises once a day and make it a lifetime habit.

Am I doing the right exercise?

When you are passing urine, you can try to stop the flow towards the end of stream. If the flow slows or stops, your technique is correct, and if nothing happens you may just be weak. Keep up the exercises and try again in a few weeks before seeking advice.

If the flow speeds up, you are doing the wrong technique and you should stop the exercise until a health professional has shown you how to do it properly.

This is a test only, do it no more than once a week, otherwise it may interfere with normal bladder emptying.

Protect yourself for life:

- Tighten the pelvic floor muscles before exertion, for example, coughing, sneezing, laughing and lifting
- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles gently (less than the exercise) and try to hold for as long as possible when you are on your feet for a long time or going up and down stairs
- Avoid heavy lifting (where you need two hands) for at least three months after pelvic surgery
- Avoid heavy lifting for up to eight weeks after normal childbirth

If you are having problems doing your pelvic floor exercises, please see your GP. They may refer you to a nurse or physiotherapist to show you how to do the exercises properly.

Resources at Whittington Health

Pelvic Health Physiotherapist – Tel: 020 7288 5660
whh-tr.outpatienttherapy@nhs.net

Assessment and treatment by referral only

Community Bladder and Bowel service for Haringey and Islington residents, GP and self-referral:
<https://www.whittington.nhs.uk/default.asp?c=33288>
 Telephone: 020 3316 8401/8398

Pelvic Health Physiotherapy, maternity and consultant referral

<https://www.whittington.nhs.uk/?c=42977>

Whittington leaflets

<http://www.whittington.nhs.uk/default.asp?c=9260>

Further resources

Pelvic, obstetric and gynaecological physiotherapy

For leaflets including 'Pelvic Floor Exercises (For Women)' visit
https://thepogp.co.uk/patient_information/

Bladder and Bowel Community

<https://www.bladderandbowel.org/>
 Email: help@bladderandbowel.org

Bladder Health UK

<https://bladderhealthuk.org/>
 Tel: 0121 702 0820 (advice line)
 Email: info@bladderhealthuk.org

Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please email whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net. We will try our best to meet your needs.

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