



Information Guide

Your Wellbeing and Independence



Strengthening the pelvic floor

What this guide is about

In this guide we look at the pelvic floor muscles, why they need to be strengthened and how to do so. The pelvic floor muscles are just like any other muscle, they get stronger and more effective the more you use them. A stronger pelvic floor can help you improve bladder and bowel control or even stop leakage.

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Contents

What is the pelvic floor?	4
What does it do?	4
What happens when the pelvic floor gets weak?	5
How does the pelvic floor work?	5
Why do pelvic floor muscles weaken?	6
Who should do pelvic floor exercises?	6
Why should I do pelvic floor exercises?	7
How do I find the pelvic floor muscles?	7
How do I do pelvic floor exercises?	8
Performing the slow-twitch pelvic floor exercises	8
Performing the fast-twitch pelvic floor exercises	9
Do not:	9
How often should I do these exercises?	10

What is the pelvic floor?

Both men and women have pelvic floor muscles. They are a sheet of muscles that stretch from the base of your spine (your tailbone or coccyx) at the back to your pubic bone at the front, and from side-to-side. They form a 'platform' or 'hammock' between your legs, providing the floor to your pelvis (the bottom part of the abdomen).

What does it do?

Firm and well-toned pelvic floor muscles help to support the contents of your pelvis, including your bladder, bowel, and uterus (for women), as well as the openings for the organs which pass through it.

In men there are two openings which pass through the pelvic floor muscles - the urethra (the tube which you pass urine through) and the anus (back passage). In women there are three openings - the urethra, the anus and vagina (birth canal).

The pelvic floor muscles will not support these openings effectively if they are weakened or not in a good condition. If you do not exercise a muscle, it will weaken through lack of use.

Your pelvic floor muscles work in several different ways. They contract strongly and quickly when there is a sudden increase in intra-abdominal pressure to prevent leakage (such as when coughing, sneezing, or straining) - they help to keep the opening to the bladder closed; they also contract with less power, but for a longer duration, when you need to hold on for some time without 'letting go'. They also help to control leakage of wind or bowel motions.

What happens when the pelvic floor gets weak?

If the pelvic floor weakens, you may experience a range of symptoms, including:

- A tendency to leak urine when you laugh, cough, or sneeze – known as *stress urinary incontinence*.
- A need to go to the toilet frequently during the day or night.
- An urgent need to visit the toilet, and leaking before you get there or if you do not go – known as *urge urinary incontinence*.
- An inability to control the passing of wind from your back passage.
- An urgent need to visit the toilet to empty your bowels and leaking stool before you get there or if you do not go – known as *urge faecal incontinence*.

For some men, the lower bowel can prolapse (slip down) through the anal canal - bowel control can be affected as a result. For some women, weak pelvic floor muscles can result in prolapse of one or more of the pelvic floor organs, including the bladder, womb or bowel - a prolapse occurs when these organs are not properly supported and they begin to push down against the vaginal walls. Symptoms can include a bulging or heavy dragging sensation in the vagina, pain or discomfort during intercourse.

Pelvic floor exercises have been shown to be very effective for helping with stress urinary continence.

How does the pelvic floor work?

The pelvic floor muscles are kept firm and somewhat tense in order to prevent leakage from the bladder or bowels. When you pass urine or have a bowel movement, these muscles relax, and then tighten once again afterwards to re-establish control. When you cough, sneeze, laugh or lift, these muscles actively contract to prevent leakage.

Why do pelvic floor muscles weaken?

Pelvic floor muscles can become weak:

- Through a lack of exercise – just like any other muscle, they need regular exercise to maintain good muscle tone. If they are neglected, they can become stretched, weaker and less effective.
- Following pelvic surgery – for example, an operation for an enlarged prostate gland.
- Repeated and prolonged straining to open and empty your bowels, usually due to constipation – the ‘pushing down’ movement when straining to open your bowels can overstretch pelvic floor muscles, making them weaker.
- By being overweight – any extra weight puts pressure onto the pelvic floor.
- Repeated heavy lifting.
- Having a chronic (long-term) cough, such as a ‘smoker’s cough’, hay fever, asthma, or chronic bronchitis – every cough ‘bounces’ on your pelvic floor, so a persistent cough can overstretch and damage the muscles.
- After childbirth – the strain and stretching involved with childbirth can weaken the pelvic floor.
- As a result of the menopause.

Who should do pelvic floor exercises?

Pelvic floor exercises can help both men and women gain more control over their bladder and bowels. Like any other muscle, it is stronger and more functional the more it is used, so everyone can benefit from exercising their pelvic floor muscles throughout their life.

Why should I do pelvic floor exercises?

Pelvic floor exercises can help to strengthen your muscles and support your pelvic organs once again, and improve your bladder and bowel control to improve or even stop leakage.

These exercises are simple, effective, free, can be done anywhere and from any position (such as lying, sitting or standing), and you do not need any special equipment to perform them.

The more you use and exercise them, the stronger and more effective they become.

How do I find the pelvic floor muscles?

Sit comfortably with knees slightly apart, and the muscles of your thighs, buttocks and abdomen relaxed. There are two areas to focus on:

1. Squeeze the ring of muscles around the back passage, as if you are trying to stop passing wind from the bowel – this works the back part of the pelvic floor. It should feel like the skin around the back passage is tightening up and you are lifting up from the chair. Relax this muscle again. Practice this contraction several times until you are confident you are contracting the correct muscles. Make sure you do not squeeze your buttock muscles, tighten your thighs or abdominal muscles as you do this.
2. Tighten and draw up the muscles around your urethra (water pipe), as though you are trying to stop the flow of urine mid-stream – this works the front part of the pelvic floor.
3. Tighten the muscles around your back passage and urethra at the same time, as if trying to stop yourself passing wind and urine at the same time.

How do I do pelvic floor exercises?

After some practice, you can perform pelvic floor exercises anywhere and at any time. However, whilst learning it is best to practice from a seated position with feet flat on the floor and legs slightly apart – you can lean forwards resting your elbows on your thighs.

There are two types of pelvic floor exercises:

1. Slow-twitch pelvic floor exercises – these help to increase the strength of the pelvic floor muscles, helping them to hold back the urine.
2. Fast-twitch pelvic floor exercises – these help your pelvic floor muscles to better cope with pressure; for example, when coughing, sneezing or laughing.

It is important to perform the slow-twitch pelvic floor exercises first every time you exercise your pelvic floor muscles.

Performing the slow-twitch pelvic floor exercises

- Tighten and draw up the muscles around both the anus (back passage) and urethra (water pipe) at the same time – the contraction should be slow, strong and controlled.
- Hold for a count of 5 seconds, then slowly relax and let go.
- Repeat this for a maximum of 8-10 squeezes.
- Gradually increase the length of time you hold each contraction for, until you can hold for up to 10 seconds.

If you find that your pelvic floor muscles 'let go' too quickly or that you cannot hold for a count of 5 – hold them for as long as you can; this becomes your new baseline. For instance, if you can hold the contraction for only 3 seconds, then hold for 3 seconds each time you do the exercises, increasing to 4, then 5 seconds gradually over time.

Performing the fast-twitch pelvic floor exercises

- Pull up the pelvic floor muscles as described previously, but this time the contractions are short and fast – draw up rapidly and let go straightaway.
- Perform 10 repetitions.

The pelvic floor muscles fatigue easily and you may notice it takes a lot of concentration to start with to do these exercises correctly.

Do not:

- Tighten your buttocks, thighs, or stomach muscles.
- Squeeze your knees/legs together.
- Push down (rather than squeezing).
- Hold your breath.
- Lift your shoulders, eyebrows or toes.

If you do any of these, you are not contracting your pelvic floor muscles correctly.

When you are exercising the pelvic floor muscles, there should be no visible outside signs – no-one should be able to tell you are performing them.

When you feel confident performing these pelvic floor exercises whilst sitting, try doing them in other positions, such as standing up or lying down.

How often should I do these exercises?

You should aim to do these pelvic floor exercises on a daily basis, including both the slow-twitch and fast-twitch variations. Many advocate performing them several times each day, doing them at regular times during the day; for example, after going to the toilet, after a meal, when having a drink, etc. Make sure you do them correctly each time - it is better to perform a few good squeezes than lots of perfunctory ones.

Every two weeks, test the strength of your pelvic floor muscles by stopping the flow of urine mid-stream. By contracting the pelvic floor in the same way as you do in the exercises, you may be able to slow down the flow of urine, or even stop it completely. Over time, you should notice an improvement. Do not do this test more often than once a fortnight as it can cause problems with normal bladder emptying.

Whenever you cough, sneeze, laugh, rise from a chair, lift anything heavy, or before doing anything that might make you leak, brace your pelvic floor muscles by squeezing up and holding the contraction.

It takes several weeks of regular exercise to start regaining the strength in your pelvic floor muscles. Until then, you will probably not discern any improvement. It can take a few months to reach maximum effectiveness. These pelvic floor exercises then need to be continued for the rest of your life; otherwise, if you stop, they weaken again – use it or lose it.

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