



Pelvic floor exercises for women

What is the pelvic floor?

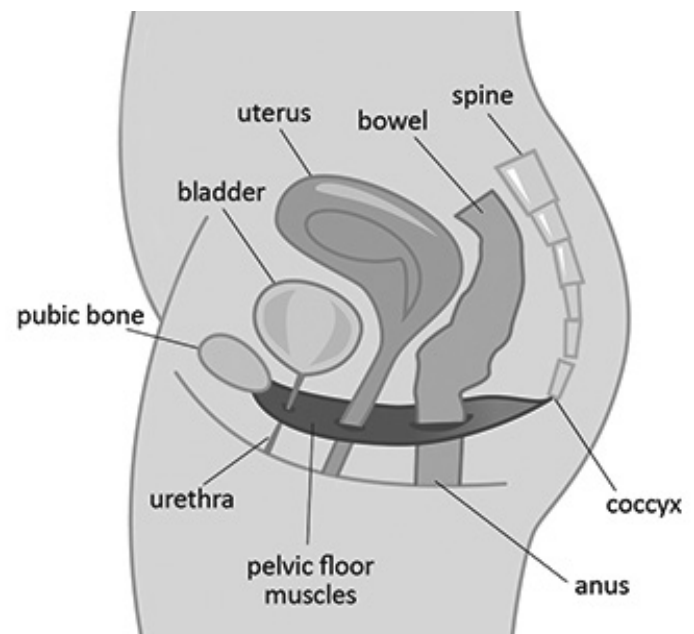
The pelvic floor consists of layers of muscle and ligaments that stretch like a hammock from the pubic bone in front to the end of the backbone and from side to side. Firm, supportive pelvic floor muscles help to hold the bladder, womb and bowel in place and also helps to close the bladder outlet and anus.

How does the pelvic floor work?

The muscles of the pelvic floor are kept firm and slightly tense to stop leakage of urine from the bladder and of wind or faeces from the bowel. When you pass water or have a bowel motion the pelvic floor muscles relax. Afterwards they tighten again to restore control.

The muscles should actively squeeze when you laugh, cough, lift or sneeze so as to help you avoid leaking. They also have an important sexual function, helping to increase sexual awareness for both yourself and your partner during sexual intercourse.

Pelvic floor muscles can become weak and sag because of childbirth, prolonged straining to empty your bowel, lack of exercise, obesity the change of life or just getting older. Weak muscles give you less control and you may leak urine or faeces, especially with exercise, or when you laugh, cough, lift an object or sneeze.



How to do pelvic floor exercises?

It is not always easy to find your pelvic floor muscles. Exercising them should not show at all 'on the outside'. You should also not pull in your tummy excessively, squeeze your legs together, tighten your buttocks or hold your breath.

To undertake pelvic floor exercises you should try the following:

1. Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Imagine you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from the bowel by squeezing the muscle around the anus. Try squeezing and lifting that muscle as if you really do have wind. You should be able to feel the muscle move. Your buttocks and legs should not move at all. You should be aware of a sensation around the anus tightening and being pulled up and away from your chair. Really try to feel this squeezing and lifting.
2. Now imagine that you sitting on the toilet passing urine. Picture yourself trying to stop the stream of urine. Try doing it now while you are reading this. You should be using the same group of muscles that you used before but don't be surprised if you find this harder. You can also try this whilst urinating - but do not try and stop the stream when you are actually passing water as this may (if repeated) cause problems with the proper emptying of your bladder.

3. To check if you are exercising the right muscles you can put one or two fingers in the vagina and try the exercise - you should feel a gentle squeeze as the pelvic floor contracts.

Tips to help you

- Get into the habit of doing your exercises with things you do regularly e.g. when you come into contact with water or when you answer the phone
- Drink 1½ - 2 litres or 7-8 cups a day. Avoid caffeine. Avoid blackcurrant juice
- Avoid becoming constipated and straining to open your bowels.
- Try not to lift or carry heavy things. If you do lift, first tighten your pelvic floor muscles, to give support.

Individual pelvic floor exercise programme

Following assessment your nurse/ physiotherapist will discuss your individual exercise programme.

The Slow Exercise:

- Squeeze and pull up to contract your pelvic floor muscles holding for a count of seconds.
- Relax for a count of 4 seconds, repeat exercise times.

Followed by the Fast Exercise:

- Squeeze and pull up your pelvic floor muscles (as fast as you can, relax the muscle straight away). Repeat this times.
- Aim to repeat these exercises times everyday.

Concentrate on each exercise. It takes time for the exercises to make your muscles stronger. You may not notice any improvement for several weeks – so stick at it. Please remember that Pelvic floor exercises, when done correctly, can build up and strengthen the muscles that help you hold in urine. Pelvic floor exercises are the most effective treatment for stress incontinence.

Further useful information can be found at: www.nhsinform.scot

Further help and information

If you are experiencing continence issues, contact your GP or Community Nurse.

We are listening - how did we do?

We welcome your feedback, as it helps us evaluate the services we provide. If you would like to tell us about your experience:

- speak to a member of staff
- visit our website: www.wihb.scot.nhs.uk/feedback or share your story at: www.careopinion.org.uk or tel. 0800 122 31 35
- tel. 01851 708069 Monday-Friday between 9am-5.30pm.