

## Rehabilitation Department

# A Guide to Pelvic Floor Exercises for Women

### How many women have problems with pelvic floor muscle dysfunction?

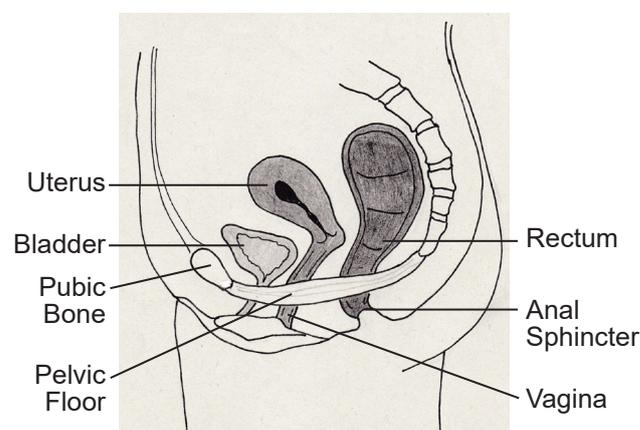
- Up to 1/3 of all women in the UK have pelvic floor muscle related problems. They may have difficulty in controlling their bladder or bowels and leak in their underwear. This can happen when they exercise, laugh, cough or sneeze.
- They may have problems with a prolapse.
- Many people feel embarrassed and upset with these problem and find it interferes with their lives.

### What do the Pelvic Floor Muscles do and where are they?

The pelvic floor muscles help to control when you pass urine (wee) and empty your bowels (poo). These muscles should be firm and strong. If they are weak they will not provide the support and control that they should.

Pelvic floor muscles are important in posture and work with abdominal muscles to support your spine.

The pelvic floor muscles are just inside your body. They are attached between the bottom of your spine (the coccyx or tail bone) and the bone between your legs (pubic bone).



**Pelvic Floor Muscles**

# Why do the Pelvic floor muscles not work properly?

## The muscles can be damaged in many ways:

- Damage during pregnancy
- After childbirth
- A chronic or smokers cough
- Lack of general fitness
- Changes due to menopause and age
- Too much lifting heavy things
- Being constipated for a long time
- Being overweight

## If your pelvic floor muscles are damaged:

- You may leak in your underwear when you
  - Cough
  - Laugh
  - Blow your nose
  - Get up from a chair
  - Sneeze
  - Exercise
  - Lift or bend and stretch
- Some people lose control of their bowel and leak faeces (poo) in their underwear. Pelvic floor muscle exercises may help these people too.
- You may notice a heaviness of a bulge down below
  - The bladder, womb and bowels usually rest on the pelvic floor muscles. These organs may start to fall down in the pelvis if these muscles are weak. If they push against the walls of the vagina this is called a prolapse.

## How should I do pelvic floor muscle exercises?

Choose any comfortable position, with your knees slightly apart. Many people find lying down with their knees bent is a good position to start.

Tighten up your back passage as though you are trying to stop passing wind. Then tighten the muscles that you would use to stop yourself passing urine. Do these 2 together and you should be exercising your pelvic floor muscles

The feeling is one of “squeeze and lift”. Its easy to use the wrong muscles instead of the pelvic floor muscles.

## Don't

- Clench your buttocks
- Hold your breath
- Squeeze your legs together.
- Over use your upper abdominal muscles as you may be pushing downwards which is not the correct action.

## There are a few ways you can check that you are doing the exercises correctly;

- Put 1 or 2 fingers into your vagina. Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles. You should feel the muscles tighten around your fingers.
- Check with a mirror. Hold a small mirror so you can see the area between your legs. Tighten the muscles. The skin between the anus and vagina should move away from the mirror.
- If you are having sex try to exercise your pelvic floor muscles (e.g you can ask your partner if they can feel your muscles tightening).

## **It is very important to check you are using the right muscles otherwise there might not be any improvement. You could even cause more damage.**

Ask for help if you are not sure that you are using the right muscles. There are specialist physiotherapists and continence advisors who are specially trained and have skills in being able to support you in strengthening your pelvic floor muscles. Pelvic floor muscles work best when you are taught by these experts.

When you have learned these exercises you can do them in sitting, lying or standing. You need to do both slow and fast pelvic floor muscle exercises.

### **Slow exercises:**

- Gradually tighten the muscles and hold. Aim to build up to a maximum of 10 seconds. This helps the muscles provide support for your bladder and bowel.

### **Fast exercises**

- Tighten and relax the muscles quickly. This helps the muscle to stop urine leaking when you cough, laugh or exercise.

You are now ready to do a pelvic floor workout.

## **The Pelvic Floor Exercise Programme**

Now that you can do the basic exercise you can build up the endurance of the muscles so that will work harder and longer. Firstly, you need to determine your 'starting block'.

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles as previously described and hold for as long as you can (maximum = 10 seconds).

**How many seconds can you hold for?**

Relax the contraction and rest for 5 – 10 seconds.

Then repeat the 'tighten, hold and relax' movement as many times as you can (maximum = 10).

**How many times can you repeat this?**

This is your 'starting block'.

Now perform the basic exercise but squeeze and lift more firmly, and let go straight away.

This is called a quick contraction and will help your muscles react quickly when you cough, sneeze or lift, etc.

**How many quick contractions can you do?**

Aim to increase this to a maximum of 10.

You should try to repeat your starting block and quick contractions at least 3 times a day. Your starting block will change as the muscles get stronger; therefore re-assess this every few weeks.

Also try to remember to tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you cough, sneeze or lift. Try and tighten your pelvic floor muscles with any functional activity e.g. sit to stand, bending to pick something up from the floor. If you feel your upper abdominals working hard and pushing down towards your pelvic floor muscles, tighten your pelvic floor muscles to counter balance and to prevent the pelvic organs from being pushed in a downward movement.

Pelvic floor muscles are like any other muscles. You need to practise exercising them to get full strength. The muscles may get tired at first and it may take time to progress the exercises.

Don't worry. Do as much as you can. Try to do a little more each time.

## How will I know if I'm getting better?

You would expect fewer leaks in your underwear after about 3 months of exercising. Get help if there has been no improvement after 3 months. You may need to exercise up to 6 months before you see an improvement. If you were able to feel a lump in your vagina (symptom of a prolapse) you may not feel it at all or it may be not as uncomfortable.

## How will I remember to do the exercises?

It can be hard to remember. Choose something that you do 4 times a day and do your pelvic floor exercises every time you do this activity. For example whenever you switch on the kettle or meal times.

Wear a watch on the other wrist or a ring on a different finger. You can put reminders on your mobile phone or computer.

You must still do the workout at least once a day for the rest of your life and contract your pelvic floor muscles with functional activities or the muscles will become weak again.

## What if I don't improve?

Some people do need more help. It is very easy to get treatment and advice from a continence advisor or specialist physiotherapist. Our contact details are on the back of this leaflet. You may need a referral to Women's Health Physiotherapy Department from your Doctor.

### In the Physiotherapy clinic you would be asked questions such as:

- How often do you pass urine?
- How often do you leak?
- When do you leak?
- What do you normally drink?

### After you have been assessed there may be other things to try such as:

- Pelvic floor physiotherapy sessions
- Electrical stimulation of the muscles
- Vaginal weights
- Bladder training
- Bio-feedback of the muscles

## Look after your Bladder and Bowels

- Have at least 8 drinks a day. Don't have drinks that contain sugar.
- Avoid too many brown drinks such as tea, coffee, chocolate, cola. These have caffeine in them and can irritate the bladder.
- If you smoke try to stop.
- Try to keep to a normal weight.
- Eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day and avoid getting constipated.
- When you sit on the toilet keep your feet on the floor and relax.
- Never stop and start when you are having a wee on a regular basis.
- Don't go to the toilet just in case. Only go when your bladder feels full.

## Helpful Addresses:

**POGP** - Pelvic Obstetrics Gynaecological Physiotherapy [www.pogp.org.uk](http://www.pogp.org.uk)

### Bladder and Bowel Community

7 The Court,  
Holywell Business Park, Northfield Road,  
Southam, CV47 0FS  
Telephone No: (01926) 357220  
[www.bladderandbowel.org](http://www.bladderandbowel.org)

### Web Address

<http://www.cht.nhs.uk/services/clinical-services/physiotherapy-outpatients/patient-careinformation/>

### QR Code



**If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :**

Locality Manager  
Rehabilitation Department  
Calderdale Royal Hospital  
Telephone (01422) 224198

[www.cht.nhs.uk](http://www.cht.nhs.uk)

**If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.**

Potřebujete-li tyto informace v jiném formátu nebo jazyce, obraťte se prosím na výše uvedené oddělení

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem tych informacji w innym formacie lub wersji językowej, prosimy skontaktować się z nami, korzystając z ww. danych kontaktowych

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اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور فارمیٹ کی زبان میں درکار ہوں، تو  
برائے مہربانی مندرجہ بالا شعبے میں ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

"إذا احتجت الحصول على هذه المعلومة بشكل مغاير أو مترجمة إلى لغة مختلفة فيرجى منك الاتصال بالقسم  
المذكور أعلاه"