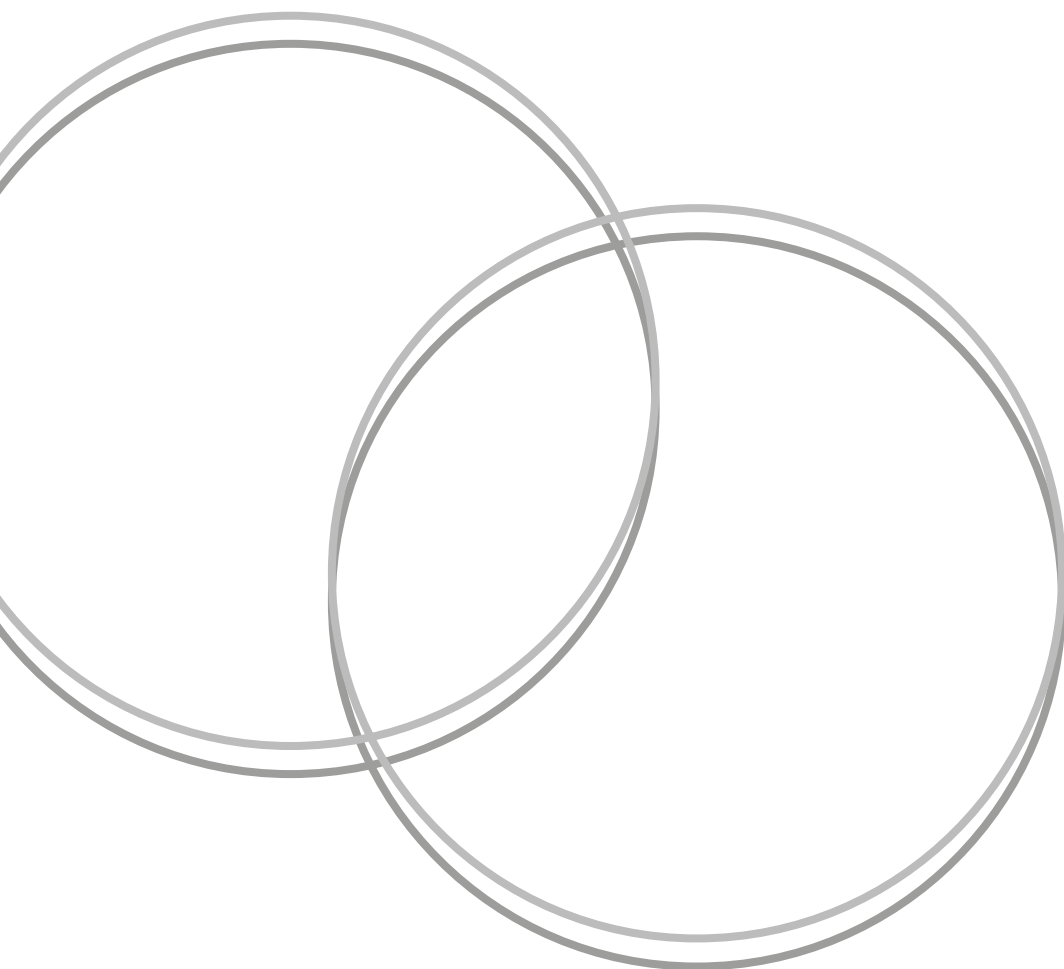


A guide to the pelvic floor muscles – Women

Information for patients



**Women's and Men's
Health Physiotherapy Department**

Introduction

Many women can experience weakness of their pelvic floor muscles.

Common symptoms of pelvic floor weakness include:

- Leaking urine with activity, for example during running, jumping, coughing and sneezing.
- A sudden and urgent need to pass urine.
- Leakage of stool from the back passage and difficulty holding wind.
- Pelvic organ prolapse, which is the descent or bulging of one or more of the pelvic organs into the vagina.
- Decreased satisfaction during sexual intercourse.

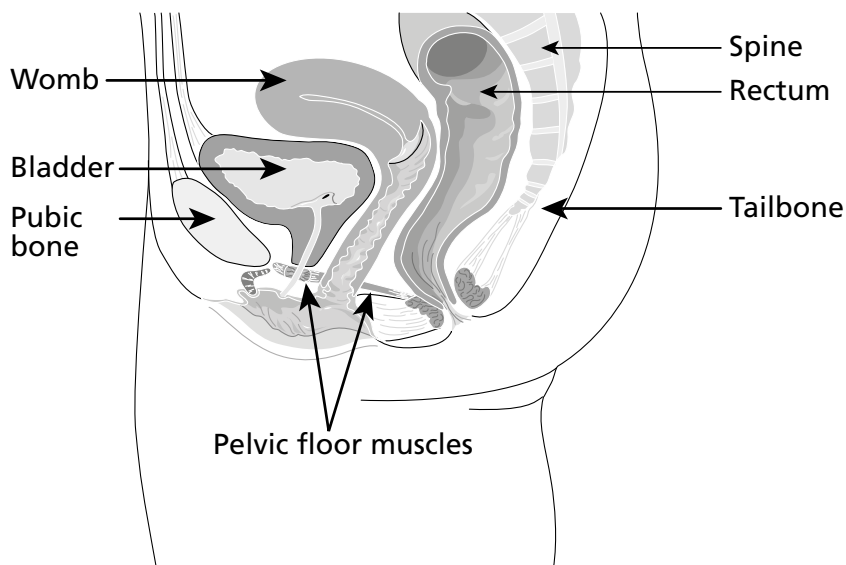
What do the pelvic floor muscles do?

The pelvic floor muscles are a supportive sling of muscles, stretching from the tailbone at the back to the pubic bone at the front. They are responsible for:

- Supporting the pelvic organs – the bladder, bowel, and womb, especially when standing.
- Helping to maintain continence (i.e. prevent leakage) of both the bladder and bowels.
- A role in sexual response.

Your pelvic floor muscles should contract when you cough, sneeze or laugh, preventing leakage of urine. The muscles should relax when you pass urine or open your bowels, and should then tighten again afterwards. This helps to control the passing of urine, bowel motions and also wind.

For optimal function the pelvic floor muscles should be able to tighten and lift up, be able to hold, and be able to fully relax and let go. The pelvic floor muscles can be strengthened just like any other weak muscle. They need to be regularly exercised to work well.



Factors leading to incontinence or weakness

- pregnancy
- childbirth
- constipation
- being overweight
- menopausal changes
- pelvic surgery/trauma
- repeated heavy lifting

How to train your pelvic floor muscles

First we need to “find the pelvic floor muscles”. To do this, start in a comfortable position. Lying down may be easiest at first, but ideally we want to be able to perform the exercises in sitting and standing eventually.

1. Imagine trying to stop yourself from passing wind – gently tighten and pull in around the back passage. At the same time imagine you are trying to stop yourself passing urine, so also gently squeeze and lift the muscles up towards the pubic bone at the front. It might help to imagine you are gently “zipping up” the muscles – starting from around the back passage and moving towards the pubic bone. Now, relax and fully let go.
2. A feeling of gentle tightening in your lower abdomen is normal, however try to avoid pulling, or “sucking in” your stomach muscles. Also try not to clench your buttock muscles or squeeze your legs together.
3. Try not to hold your breath – it is important to be able to keep breathing throughout the exercise. It might help to first take a gentle breath in, and then to tighten the muscles as you breathe out.

How to develop a pelvic floor strengthening programme

Ideally, a pelvic floor exercise programme contains a combination of both endurance holds (where you keep squeezing the muscles for a number of seconds), and quick squeezes (where you squeeze and lift up the muscles, and then immediately relax and let go).

1. First, try to find your starting point with the endurance holds. This exercise builds the endurance of the muscles, which will improve the support that the muscles are providing throughout the day.

Tighten and pull up the pelvic floor muscles, keep breathing and hold the squeeze for as long as you can, up to 10 seconds.

If you start to feel the pelvic floor squeeze fading away, relax and let go at this point.

How many seconds could you hold for? seconds

Rest for 4 seconds, and then repeat your endurance hold.

See how many repetitions you can do in a row, up to 10 (with a 4 second rest between each repetition). It is important that you feel the pelvic floor muscles relaxing and letting go after each squeeze. If you start to lose the feeling of the muscles letting go, this might mean that the muscles are fatiguing – stop at this point.

How many repetitions could you do?

So, for example, you might be able to hold for 6 seconds (then rest for 4 seconds), and do 8 repetitions – this forms the first part of your exercise programme.

2. Now, try the quick squeezes. On laughing, coughing and sneezing, your muscles need to be able to react quickly. It is important to practise these quick contractions. To do this, tighten and pull up the muscles quickly (make sure you don't tighten any other muscles!), then fully relax and let go. Rest for 1-2 seconds.

Repeat this – how many can you do in a row (up to 10)?
..... repetitions.

Aim to do your exercise programme (both the endurance holds and quick squeezes) 3 times per day. Over time, as the exercises get easier, try to hold for longer, and do more repetitions. 10 repetitions of a 10 second hold, plus 10 quick squeezes, is a good goal to work towards. Performing the exercises in upright positions such as sitting or standing is another good way to progress your exercise programme.

Physiotherapy Assessment

If you have been referred to a Women's Health physiotherapist, you may be offered an assessment of your pelvic floor muscles by your physiotherapist. This assessment allows your physio to check if you are performing the exercises correctly, and give you feedback to improve your technique if needed. Your physio will also be able to explain to you how strong your muscles are, and help to develop your pelvic floor exercise programme.

The best way to assess the pelvic floor muscles is to perform a vaginal examination. If your physiotherapist feels you would benefit from this assessment, they will fully explain this to you, and ask for your consent to complete the assessment. They will only perform the assessment if you are comfortable with this and give consent. You will be asked if you wish to have a chaperone present during your assessment.

Following assessment, your physiotherapist will give you a personalised exercise programme – this can be detailed below:

- 1. Endurance Holds:** Tighten and lift up the pelvic floor muscles. Keep breathing and hold for seconds. Now, relax and fully let go. Rest for seconds. Repeat this times.
 - 2. Quick Squeezes:** Tighten and lift up the pelvic floor muscles, then fully relax and let go. Rest for seconds. Repeat this exercise
- Perform this routine times per day.
- Position(s) for exercise:

The most difficult part of the programme is remembering to do the exercises. Our top tips to help with this are:

- Download the NHS Squeezy App – see **www.squeezyapp.com**

Note – you can put your own pelvic floor programme details into the App so that it is personalised

- Put coloured sticky notes or dots in places that will catch your eye e.g. the fridge, kettle, next to your bed or on your watch
- Set an alarm on your watch or phone
- Do your pelvic floor exercises after you have emptied your bladder (but not whilst you are passing urine)

Further useful tips and advice

1. Maintain a healthy weight range.

Maintaining the ideal weight range can make a big difference to your symptoms. If you are overweight, weight loss may improve symptoms of urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse.

2. Avoid constipation

Chronic constipation and straining to open your bowels can put pressure on the pelvic floor muscles and lead to weak muscles. It is important to drink plenty of water and maintain a healthy, varied diet. Your physiotherapist will discuss this further with you if this is relevant.

3. Drink adequate fluids

Aim to drink between 1.5 – 2 litres (3-4 pints) of fluid per day. For some women, drinks with caffeine (e.g. tea, coffee, green tea, hot chocolate or energy drinks), or fizzy drinks, may irritate the bladder. It can be helpful to try to reduce your intake of these drinks over a period of 3-4 weeks. For example, you might try switching to fruit teas or decaffeinated drinks. Gradually make any changes, and ensure that you do not restrict your fluid intake. Try to keep your fluid intake steady over the day.

4. Lifting

Heavy lifting may impact symptoms of bladder and bowel leakage, and pelvic organ prolapse. Remember to tighten your pelvic floor muscles before and during any lifting, and try to avoid straining to lift heavier loads where possible. You can discuss strategies for lifting with your physiotherapist.

5. Do I need to avoid certain types of exercise?

Some forms of exercise, such as high impact exercise (e.g. running and jumping), weight lifting or strenuous abdominal exercises, may put additional pressure on your pelvic floor muscles and possibly impact bladder, bowel and prolapse symptoms. Whilst you are working on improving your pelvic floor muscle strength and function, your physiotherapist may recommend that you avoid certain types of exercise, however they will work with you towards your exercise goals.

6. “The Knack”

The Knack refers to tightening your pelvic floor muscles during certain activities, in order to improve pelvic organ support and prevent leakage. Try to tighten your pelvic floor muscles just before and during coughing, sneezing, laughing and lifting.

7. Bladder emptying

It is important to fully empty your bladder each time you go to the toilet. Make sure you take your time. Sit and relax to pass urine. If you think you may not have completely emptied your bladder, try rocking your pelvis forward and backwards a few times. You can also try standing up, and then sitting back down and waiting a moment longer. Try not to push or strain to empty your bladder.

8. Bladder retraining

Good bladder habits include emptying your bladder 5-8 times in 24 hours. This usually means emptying your bladder every 2-4 hours. Passing volumes of 300-600mls is ideal. Some women may find that they are passing urine much more frequently, and are passing smaller volumes. Your physiotherapist may discuss some strategies to help retrain your bladder. For example, rather than rushing to the toilet when you get the urge, stop and breathe and try to stay calm. Try the following to help “calm” the urge to go:

- Curl or scrunch your toes up, or in standing go up and down onto your toes.
- Distract yourself by focussing on something else e.g. count backwards from 100 by 7's – try to count all the way back to zero.
- Tighten and pull up your pelvic floor muscles – try to hold for up to 10 seconds if you can.
- Apply pressure to the perineum (the area between the vagina and back passage) e.g sit on a hard surface, or perch on the edge of an armchair.

If symptoms continue you may need to consider seeking further medical advice.

Patient appointments

Date	Time

The information contained in this leaflet is intended for educational use only and not for the diagnosis or treatment of a specific condition, which should only be undertaken by a qualified healthcare professional.

Other sources of information

Women's and Men's Health Physiotherapy pelvic floor information video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyM_HmPWx2Y

Follow the link above or scan the QR code to watch the video.



Further information

If you require any further information after reading this leaflet, please contact:

Your physiotherapist:

Tel: **01865 235 383**

Email: **physio.womensandmenshealth@ouh.nhs.uk**

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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