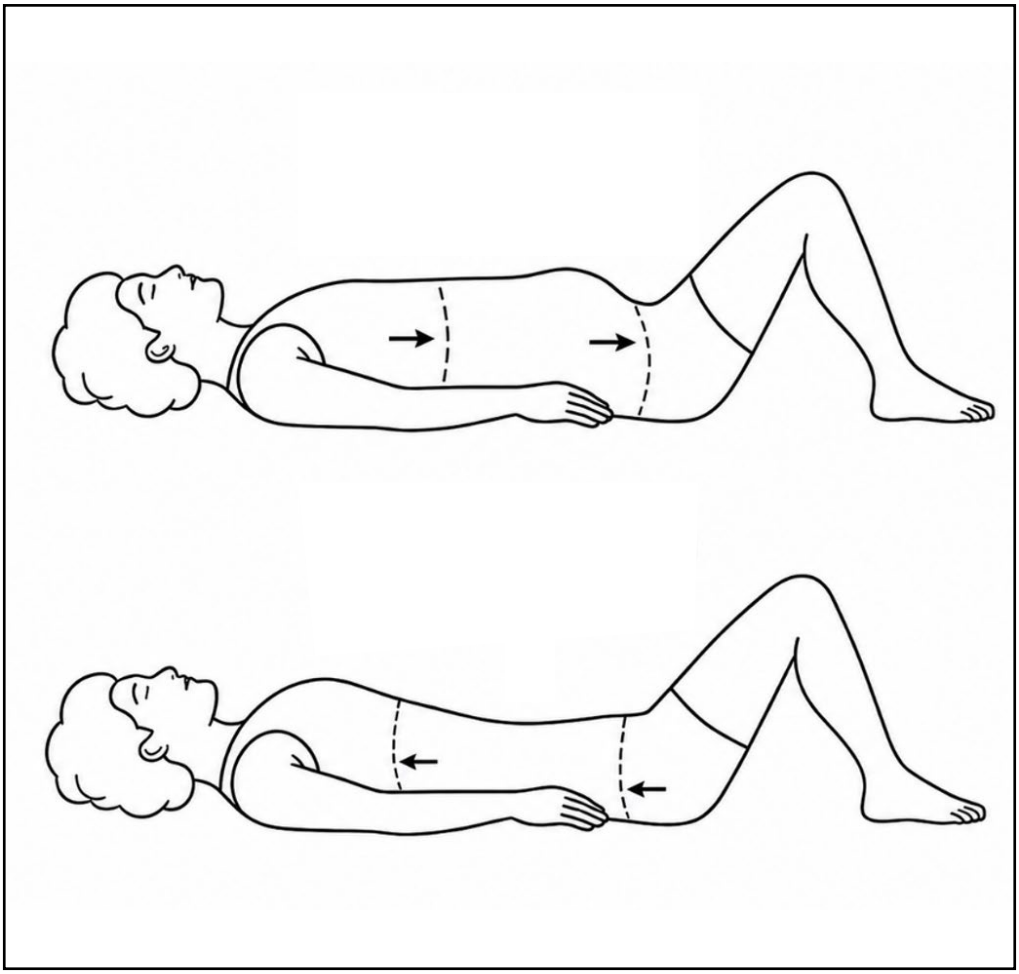
Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Pelvic Floor Awareness for Psychosexual Therapy

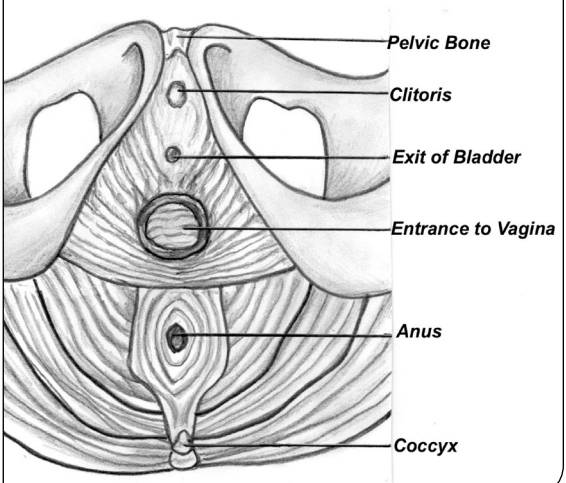
Information for patients



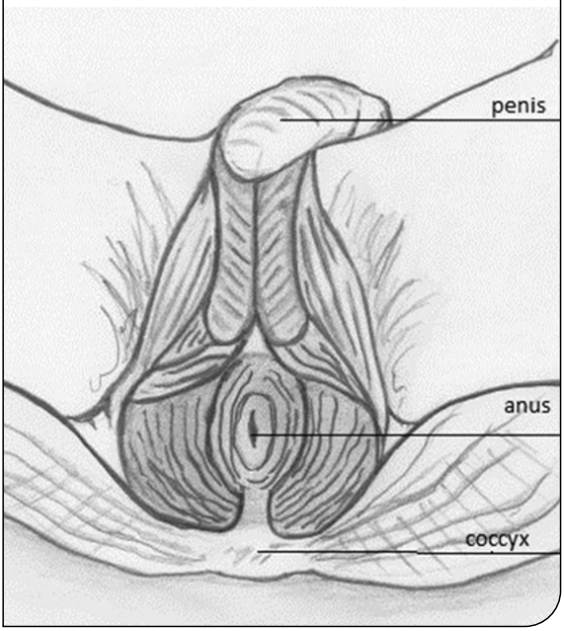
The pelvic floor muscles support the bottom of the body and the organs inside the pelvis (lower bowel, bladder and uterus where applicable). They form a sling from the tailbone (coccyx) at the back to the pubic bone at the front, surrounding the urethra (exit from bladder), vagina (where applicable) and anal canal.

When the pelvic floor muscles contract they press on the parts of the body leaving or entering the pelvis and so they can squeeze shut the exits of the bladder and bowel, and squeeze around the lower vagina. When they relax, they allow flow of urine out of the bladder or poo to pass out of the bowel; and reduce pressure around a vagina. Exercising these muscles can help maintain continence and help complete emptying of the bladder and bowel.

The pelvic floor muscles underneath the vulval skin



The pelvic floor muscles underneath the penis and scrotum



The blood vessels and nerves supplying the genital area (penis and testicles, or vulva) also travel through the layers of pelvic floor muscles to get to the genitals. Pressure from the muscles can therefore affect the blood flow to the genitals and can affect sensation in the genital area.

Exercising the pelvic floor muscles improves blood flow to the genital area, which can aid healing after surgery in the pelvis, injury or childbirth, and helps arousal. Activity of the pelvic floor muscles can contribute to orgasm intensity.

Relaxing your pelvic floor fully helps pain free penetration during sex.

Exercises to improve control and flexibility

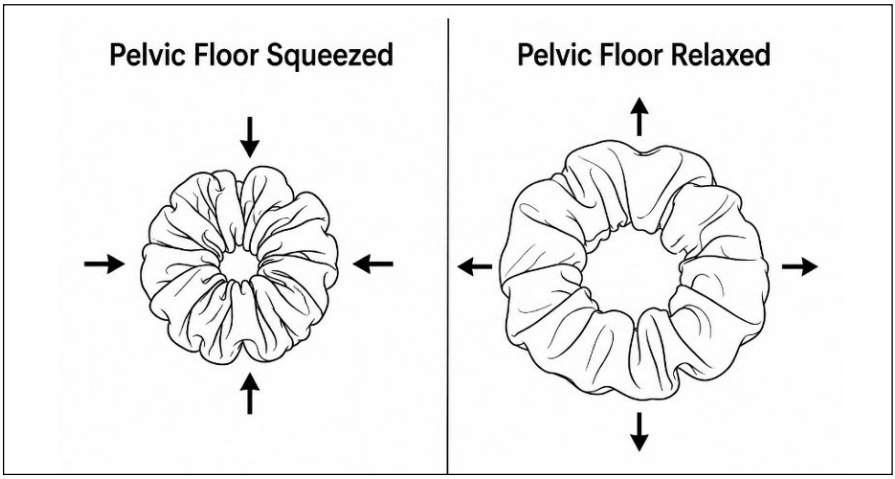
It is important to understand there is no "wrong" way to move your pelvic floor, most of us use these muscles without conscious awareness most of the time. However, for some people it is important to build a better awareness of how this part of the body moves. The muscles respond to breath, posture, and impact that the body is experiencing. They are also very important for controlling the bladder and bowel as well as sexual function.

Imagery to help you learn to use your pelvic floor

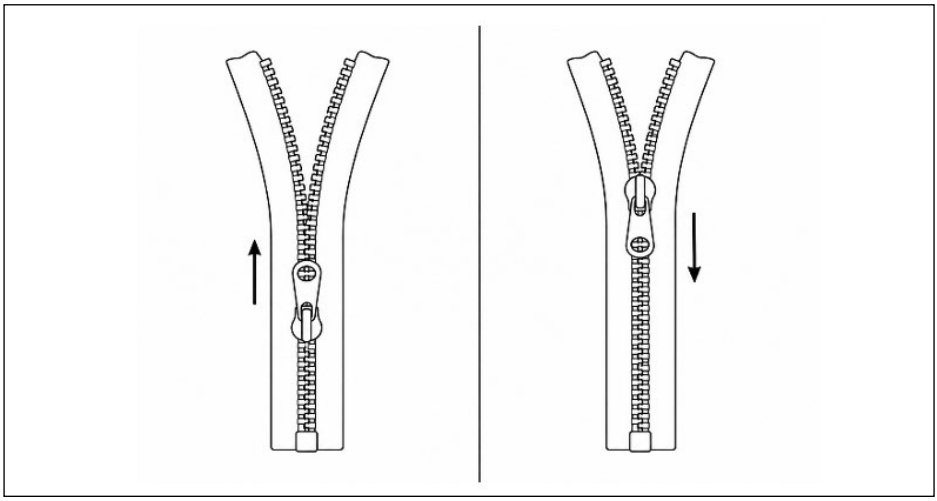
The pelvic floor muscles have three layers. The first two layers control opening and closing the bladder, vagina and anus. The third layer is internal and is responsible for raising and lowering the pelvic floor.

A lift analogy can be helpful here. Imagine a lift with doors that open and close. The opening and closing motions are the first two layers of the pelvic floor muscles. The lift moving between floors of a building is the third layer.

Other images that can help are the image of scrunching your anus tightly shut then lifting it up a little, followed by putting it back down and relaxing the scrunchie open.



Or imagine zipping up a zip that starts from your tailbone and zips shut your anus, then vagina (if applicable) then forward to zip shut your urine exit until the zip gets to the front of your pelvis. The zip can then open in the reverse direction from front to back.



How to exercise your pelvic floor muscles

Doing a small number of exercises frequently is best to train your muscles and improve control. Two or three times every day is ideal. Start with 3 or 4 repetitions each time, building up to 10 repetitions, 3 times per day.

The intensity of exercise **does not need** to be maximum effort contraction (squeezing as hard as you can). Research shows that muscles gain strength and endurance when worked at 60 - 80% of maximum effort. Don't work **too** hard but make the muscles do more than they are used to.

Muscles have endurance (like a marathon) and quick (like a sprint) contraction ability. Doing both quick pulsing contractions and longer holds will train all the muscle fibre types and improve control and flexibility.

To start with, try these exercises lying down, so that you are not working against gravity. With practice you can then try them sitting and then standing.

Slow, endurance exercise

Work up to 10 repetitions.

Squeeze the outer pelvic floor muscles (closing the doors of the lift /scrunching the scrunchie) as if you want to hold onto a fart and stop the flow of urine. Then squeeze some more to lift the internal pelvic floor muscles up a little. See if you can hold the lift up for 1-2 seconds before lowering it down, then opening the lift doors/ releasing the scrunchie. Leave the muscles relaxed for at least 2 seconds.

With practice, build up slowly to 10 seconds squeezed and lifting then 10 seconds relaxed; build up to doing this 10 times. At first, it may be hard to hold the contraction and/or hard to hold the relaxation. Build up slowly in time and frequency, aiming to exercise 3 times daily. Little and often is best.

Quick, sprint exercise

Work up to 10 repetitions.

Rapidly tense all muscle layers for 1 second, then release for at least 2 seconds. Imagining nodding the clitoris/penis and quickly closing the anus can help. If you need to take longer than 2 seconds to fully relax and lower the pelvic floor between quick pulsing contractions, then do so.

Hints to see if you are doing these exercises correctly

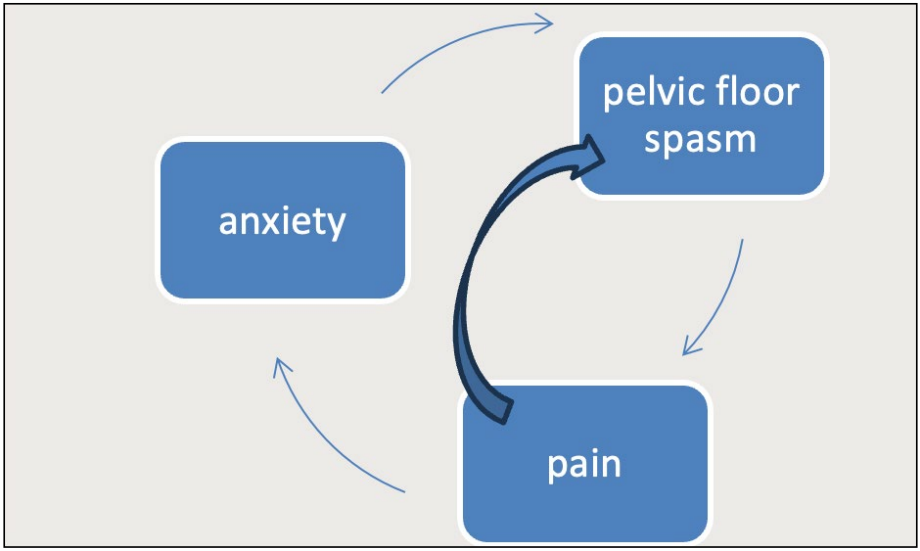
Rest a finger gently on the skin of the perineum (between the vaginal entrance and anus or between the scrotum and anus). As you squeeze and relax the pelvic floor muscles you may feel them tense and release under the skin.

If you feel comfortable to do so, put a mirror so you can see between your legs, and look at your genital area whilst doing the exercises. You will see the muscles puckering the perineal skin (between the vagina and anus, or between the scrotum and anus) as you squeeze the pelvic floor, and the skin relax back smoothly as the muscles relax underneath.

When you contract your pelvic floor you may feel slight, deep tension in your lower tummy, just above the front bone of your pelvis. This is the transversus abdominus muscle, which automatically contracts with your pelvic floor. But, if you are using muscles that move your chest, tummy wall, pelvis, buttocks or legs, then you are using the wrong muscles; no one else should be able to see that you are doing pelvic floor exercises.

Exercises to relax the pelvic floor

This breathing-based exercise will help you to relax your pelvic floor. Many people get caught in a vicious circle of pain or anxiety and holding their pelvic floor muscles tight.

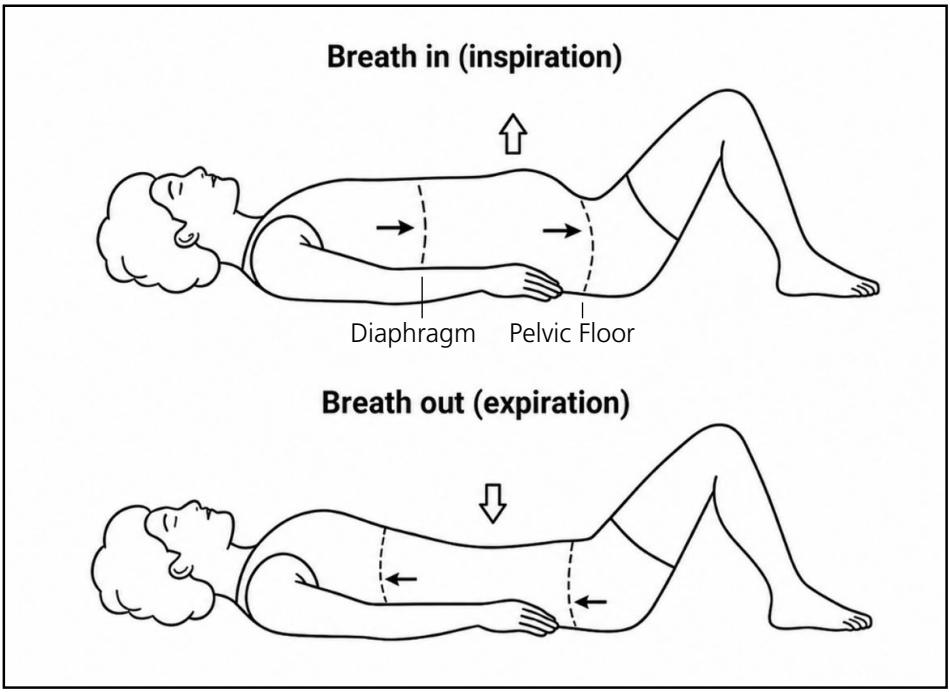


There is a natural reflex relaxation of your pelvic floor in response to breathing with your diaphragm; you can take advantage of this.

The theory

The diaphragm is a dome shaped muscle located at the base of your ribs; separating your chest from your abdomen. When you breathe in, your diaphragm flattens, moving downwards into your tummy. In response the tummy muscles let go, allowing your tummy to rise, and the pelvic floor muscles to relax downwards.

Diaphragm and pelvic floor in inspiration and expiration



The basic exercise

Lie comfortably on your back with your legs in a relaxed position (gently bent hips and knees usually most relaxing for your back) with your hands resting on your lower tummy. Slowly take a deep breath in so that the air pushes up your tummy under your hands; allow your tummy to bulge up and out as you **breathe in**. (Don't push with your tummy muscles to do this, instead let the air fill an imaginary balloon in your tummy.) Try not to breathe in using your chest muscles and shoulders, keep them still. If you are aware of it allow your pelvic floor to move outward and downwards towards your feet with each **breath in**.

(Do not worry if you are not aware of pelvic floor movement, this will happen automatically if you breathe in this relaxed way).

As you practice this breathing, imagine your pelvic floor muscles descending and your sitting bones widening or flaring to make more space for the muscles. This relaxes the pelvic floor.

Repeat deep slow breaths in then out, 10 times, twice to three times per day.

Helpful hints

- Place your tongue at the top of your mouth with your teeth slightly apart. This allows your jaw to relax and allows you to take a relaxed breath.
- Breathe in (inhale) through your nose, letting your nostrils flare.
- Allow your ribs to expand to the sides and back, while your tummy rises as you breathe in.
- Pause for a few seconds at the end of the in breath.
- Breathe out (exhale) slowly through your mouth, slightly puckering your lips. This lip position creates slight resistance and allows the air to flow out gradually.
- Spend more time on breathing **out**: count to 4 as you inhale, pause, then count to 8 as you exhale.
- Try the breathing with different leg positioning; you may want to put a pillow under your knees.

Extending the exercise

There are situations in which using the exercise above may be particularly helpful in relaxing your pelvic floor.

If you have been advised to use vaginal or anal trainers to help with pain on penetration, then you can use the exercise above to relax your pelvic floor before slipping the trainer in. Continuing the deep "tummy" breathing whilst the trainer is in place will help keep your muscles relaxed.

If you have trouble fully emptying your bladder or bowel, then doing this exercise whilst on the toilet can relax the pelvic floor muscles and help with complete emptying. Raising your feet with two small boxes, so that you are in a squatting position whilst sitting on the toilet, can also help.

Finally

Pay attention to your body whilst doing these exercises. Try not to become distracted by other thoughts. These exercises are designed to help with intimacy, so try thinking about your body and sensations.

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.

Author: Psychosexual Team, Oxfordshire Sexual Health Service
October 2026
Review: October 2029
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
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