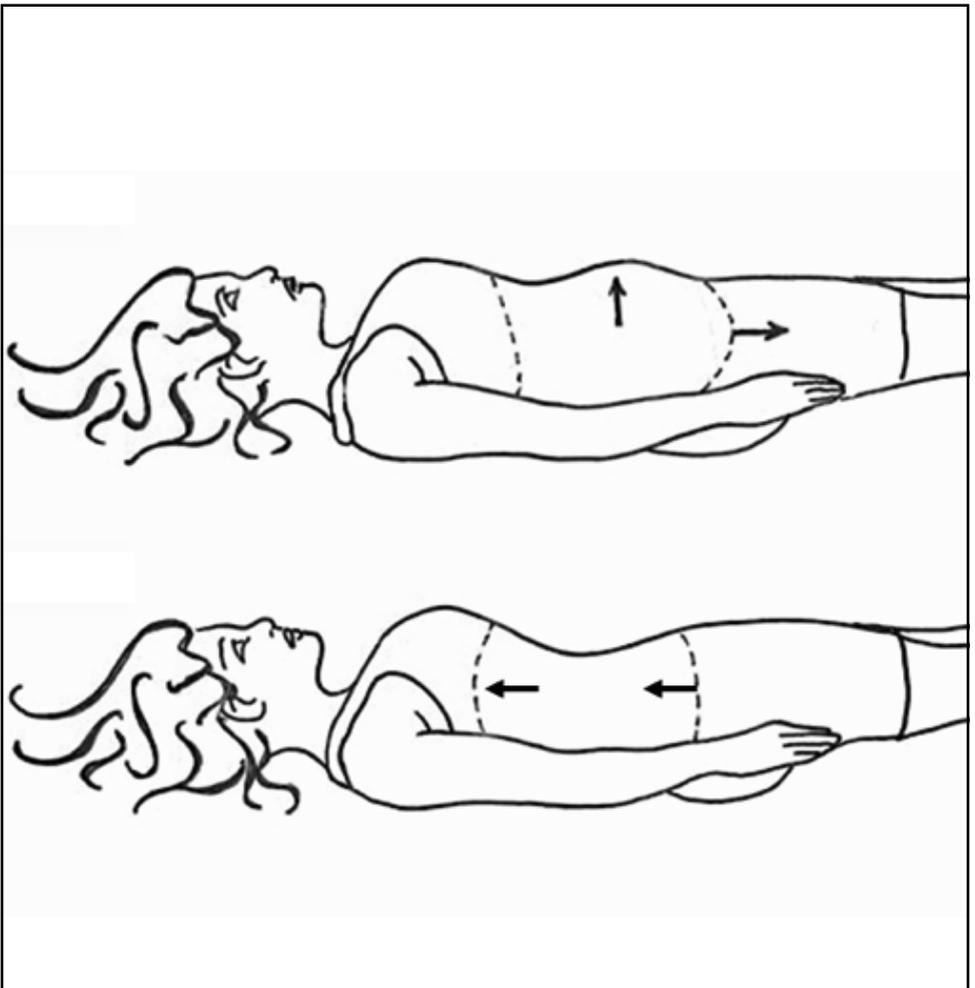


Pelvic floor awareness for psychosexual therapy

Information for women

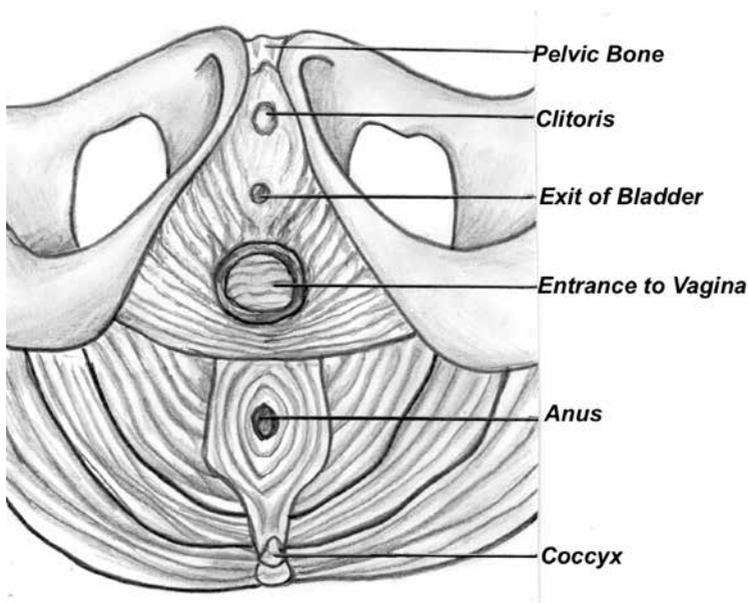


The pelvic floor muscles support the bottom of the pelvis and the organs inside the pelvis (lower bowel, bladder and uterus). They form a sling from the pubic bone at the front, to the tailbone (coccyx) at the back, surrounding the urethra (exit from bladder), vagina and rectum.

When the pelvic floor muscles contract, they close the vaginal walls and squeeze shut the exits of the bladder and bowel. The pelvic floor muscles are also involved in control of passing urine and bowel motions. Exercising these muscles can help maintain continence and help complete emptying of the bladder and bowel.

Exercising the pelvic floor muscles improves blood flow to the vaginal area, which aids healing after childbirth or surgery, and helps arousal and vaginal lubrication. Some of the muscles attach to the clitoris and can move it, as well as assisting in clitoral erection – they can contribute to orgasm intensity.

Relaxing your pelvic floor fully allows pain free penetration.



Female pelvic floor muscles

Exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor and improve control and flexibility

Imagery to help you learn to use your pelvic floor

The pelvic floor muscles have three layers. The first two layers are grouped together; these external layers are responsible for closing and opening the bladder and the vaginal and rectal openings. When using these external layers, it is helpful to imagine the doors of a lift opening and closing.

The third deep muscle layer is responsible for raising and lowering the pelvic floor; imagine the lift moving up and down the lift shaft. The top floor of the lift is behind your belly button. The ground floor is resting on the chair seat if you are sitting down.

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.

Close the lift doors by squeezing as if you want to stop the flow of urine and hold onto your bowels, then squeeze the deep pelvic floor muscles to send the lift up towards the top floor. See if you can hold the lift up for 2 seconds before lowering it down to the ground floor, then opening the doors. Leave the muscles relaxed on the ground floor for at least 2 seconds.

With practice, build up slowly to 10 seconds on the top floor 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 and closing the vaginal opening 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

Get a mirror out and look at your vaginal and perineal area whilst doing the exercises. You will see the muscles puckering the skin and closing off your vagina and anus. You may see your clitoral hood moving downwards (nodding) with each contraction.

Place a finger gently inside your vaginal entrance and feel the squeeze as you contract and the space around your finger as you relax.

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 women get caught in a vicious circle of pain and holding their pelvic floor muscles tight.

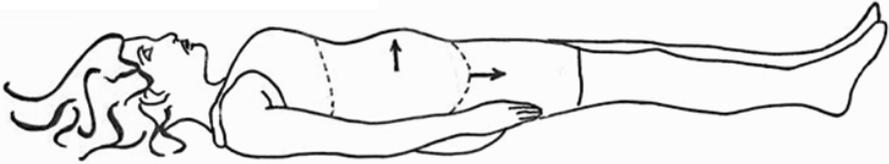
There is a natural reflex relaxation of your pelvic floor in response to breathing with your diaphragm; you can take advantage of this.

The Theory

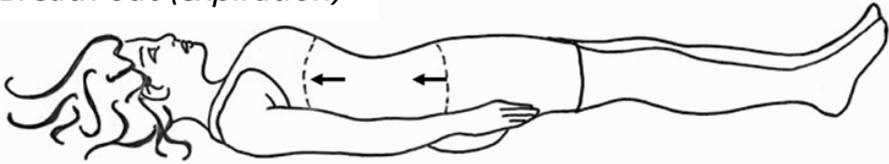
The diaphragm is a dome shaped muscle located at the base of your ribs; separating your chest from your abdomen. To breathe in, your diaphragm flattens, moving downwards into your tummy. This makes your tummy rise/bulge out and your pelvic floor automatically relaxes in response.

Diaphragm and pelvic floor in inspiration and expiration

Breath in (inspiration)



Breath out (expiration)



The basic exercise

Lie comfortably on your back with your legs in a relaxed position (bent or straight) and your hands resting on your tummy. Slowly take a big breath in with your diaphragm; allow your tummy to bulge up and out as you breathe **in**. Try not to breathe in using your chest muscles and shoulders, keep them still. Allow your pelvic floor to move outward and downwards towards your feet with each breath **in**.

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 dilators to help with pain on penetration, then you can use the exercise above to relax your pelvic floor before slipping the dilator into your vagina. Continuing the deep “tummy” breathing whilst the dilator 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 become distracted by other thoughts. These exercises are to help with sex, so try thinking about your body and intimacy with your partner.

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

Author: Psychosexual Team, Oxfordshire Sexual Health Service
May 2017
Review: May 2020
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Oxford OX3 9DU
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information

