

Pelvic Floor Exercises

The pelvic floor muscles stretch between the tailbone of the spine and the pubic bone in front. They support the bladder and bowel (and vagina and uterus in women). Pelvic floor exercises strengthen pelvic floor muscles for good bladder and bowel control.

Weak pelvic floor muscles can lead to weak bladder and bowel control. This may mean a little bit of urine dribbling out when you cough or sneeze, often feeling an urgent need to use a toilet, needing to go to the toilet frequently and other toileting problems. Pelvic floor exercises will strengthen pelvic floor muscles and may lead to better bladder and bowel control. Strong pelvic floor muscles can also mean better recovery from childbirth and increased sexual sensation. Regular pelvic floor exercises can benefit people of all ages.

Symptoms of weak pelvic floor muscles

- Leaking urine when you cough, sneeze, strain, run, lift or laugh.
- Difficulty holding on when you need to go to the toilet.
- An urgent need to empty your bladder or bowel, or loss of bladder or bowel control.
- Poor control of anal wind (flatus) when bending or lifting.
- Backache.

Also for women

- Difficulty keeping tampons in place.
- Passing wind (flatus) from the vagina when bending or lifting.
- The uterus, bladder or rectum prolapses (drops down out of its normal position).
- Vaginal bulging, dragging, aching or a heavy feeling.
- Reduced vaginal sensation.

Causes of weak pelvic floor muscles

Include:

- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Low oestrogen levels after menopause
- Obesity
- Repeated straining on the toilet due to constipation
- Repeated heavy lifting
- Constant coughing
- High impact exercise e.g., running, basketball
- Some forms of surgery.

Self care

- Do pelvic floor exercises every day. You can do them anywhere without anyone noticing (e.g., when driving, doing the dishes, waiting for a bus or reading). Learn how to do them correctly.
- Eat a regular, healthy diet, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Keep to a healthy weight.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine light-coloured (unless a doctor advises otherwise).
- Avoid constipation and avoid straining to pass a motion.

- Learn how to lift heavy objects safely.
- Consult a doctor about continual coughing.

Also for women

- Ask a doctor to check the strength of your pelvic floor muscles when having a pap smear test.
- Prepare your pelvic floor muscles for childbirth and recondition them as soon as possible afterwards. Exercising the pelvic floor muscles will speed the healing of an episiotomy.

Pelvic floor exercises

- Correct technique is important. Check with a doctor, continence adviser or physiotherapist to make sure you are doing these exercises properly.
- These exercises can be done while lying, sitting or standing.
- If your urine control does not improve, consult a doctor.

Finding your pelvic floor

1. Stopping urine flow: When next passing urine, stop the flow midstream. It should stop completely, not just slow to a trickle. Then relax and finish passing urine without straining. The muscles you tighten and pull upwards to stop the urine flow are pelvic floor muscles. Only do this to learn the correct muscles to use, as doing this too often will interfere with your bladder function.
2. Visualising your pelvic floor: Imagine that you are trying to stop passing wind (flatus) and stop a flow of urine. Relax your thigh, bottom and tummy muscles. Tighten the muscles around the anus, vagina and front passage and try to lift them up inside. Try not to squeeze your buttocks and do not push the muscles down. The muscles that contract when you do all these things are pelvic floor muscles.

Test your muscle strength

Women

- Place one or two clean fingers in your vagina and then squeeze your pelvic floor muscles. You should feel a tightening and lifting around your fingers.

Men

- With one hand lift your penis and scrotum out of the way.
- Press one finger of your other hand on the area between your anus and scrotum. When tightening your pelvic floor muscles, you will feel this area move up and away from your finger. If the muscles are weak it will not rise very far or stay up for very long.

Pelvic squeezes

- Tighten and draw in the pelvic floor muscles, lifting them up inside. Hold as strongly as possible for a count of five, then release and relax.
- Repeat the lift, squeeze, release and relax up to a maximum of 10 squeezes. You should rest in between each contraction for about 10 seconds. If you find it easy to hold for a count of five, try holding for longer – up to 10 seconds.
- After a set of the exercises above, contract and relax the pelvic floor muscles quickly and strongly 5–10 times, without holding the contractions or resting between them. These quick exercises help the bladder to hold urine when it is under pressure (e.g., when you are coughing, sneezing or lifting a heavy object).
- Do the exercises a few times a day.

Make sure you do not use or tighten your bottom, stomach, hip or leg muscles, and do not hold your breath – lift up and squeeze, do not push down.

Remember that it takes time to strengthen muscles, and it may be a few months before you notice an improvement.

For more information

A physiotherapist

Contact the Australian Physiotherapy Association listed under 'A' in the white pages of the phone book
Website: www.physiotherapy.asn.au

Continence Foundation of Australia

– National Continence Helpline
Phone: 1800 33 00 66
Website: www.contfound.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222
Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)
Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

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Your Self Care Pharmacy: