



PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLE EXERCISE IN FEMALE

What is the pelvic floor and why does it become weak?

The pelvic floor is a complex layer of muscles and ligaments which stretches like a hammock from the pubic bone (at the front) to the tail end of the backbone .

The pelvic floor has several functions:

- It supports your pelvic and abdominal organs, especially when you are standing or straining;
- It helps the opening of the bladder to stay closed when you cough, sneeze or strain;
- It is used to control leakage of wind or motions from your lower bowel;
- It helps to increase sexual awareness by tightening during intercourse.

The pelvic floor can become weak because of childbirth, prolonged straining to empty your bowels, lack of exercise and the menopause. It may, of course, simply deteriorate as a result of ageing. A weak pelvic floor gives you less control so that you leak urine when you exercise, cough, lift or sneeze.

How can exercising the pelvic floor muscles help?

Exercising the pelvic floor muscles can strengthen them so that they provide the support you need. This will improve your bladder control and improve (or even stop) leakage of urine. Like any other muscles in the body, the more you use and exercise them, the stronger they become.

How do I find the pelvic floor muscles?

It is not easy to identify your pelvic floor muscles. Exercising them should not show at all "on the outside".

Here is what to do:

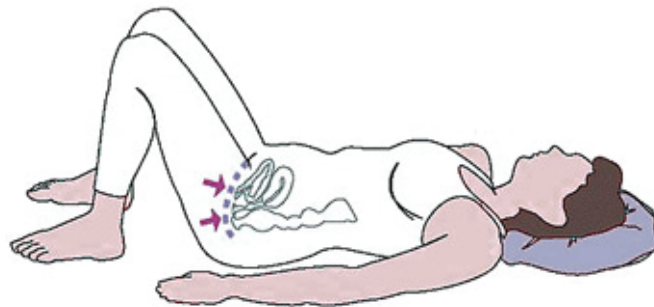
- Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind from the bowel. To do this, you must squeeze the muscle around the back passage. Try lifting and squeezing the muscle as if you have wind. You should be able to feel the muscle move and your buttocks or legs should not move at all. You should notice that the skin around your back passage tightens up and creates the sensation of lifting you from your chair
- Imagine that you are sitting on the toilet to pass urine and try to stop yourself from producing a stream of urine. You should be using the same group of muscles that you used before but you will find this a little more difficult. Do not try to stop the urinary stream when you are actually passing water because this may cause problems with bladder emptying
- Try to tighten the muscles around your back passage and vagina, lifting up inside as if you are trying to stop passing wind and urine at the same time. Try to avoid tensing your abdomen, squeezing your legs together, tightening your buttocks or holding your breath. If you can master this, most of the muscle contraction should be coming from the pelvic floor



How do I practise the exercises?

You need to develop two type of muscle activity, slow and fast. To practice slow contractions do the exercises above and try to hold the pelvic floor tight for up to ten seconds. Rest for four seconds and then repeat the contraction as many times as you can up to a maximum of ten.

To practice quick contractions, which will protect you against leakage during coughing, laughing or exercise, draw the pelvic floor rapidly upwards and hold this for one second. Repeat up to a maximum of ten times. Aim to do one set of slow contractions followed by one set of fast contractions six times a day.



Are there any other tips?

- Get into the habit of doing your exercises regularly and linking them to everyday activities e.g. do them after emptying your bladder, while answering the telephone or whenever you turn on a tap;
- If you are not sure you are doing the exercises correctly, insert a thumb or two fingers into the vagina and try the exercises. You should feel a gentle squeeze as the muscles contract;
- Use the pelvic floor exercises to prevent leakage i.e. before you do anything which might make you leak. This way, your control will gradually improve;
- Drink normally (at least six to eight cups per day) avoiding caffeine if you can;
- Avoid going to the toilet "just in case". Go only when you feel that your bladder is full;
- Watch your weight. Extra weight puts more strain on your pelvic floor muscles;
- pelvic floor exercises should give the best results three to six months, but you should continue them for life to safeguard against problems recurring.

You are strongly recommended to seek help from a health professional if you see little or no change in your symptoms after trying these exercises for three months; and other methods which help some women include weighted vaginal cones, biofeedback and electrical stimulation.

Consult your urologist or specialist nurse for more details.