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Kegel (Perineal Muscle) Exercises For Improved Control of Urination

What are Kegel exercises?

Kegel exercises are exercises that strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. These are the set of muscles and ligaments that support your bladder and helps close your urethra, the tube that drains your bladder. Kegel exercises are named for the doctor who developed them in the 1940s.

Why are they used?

Many women experience the uncontrollable loss of a small amount of urine (usually only a few drops). This is called Stress Urinary Incontinence (SUI). The usual symptoms are loss of urine and wet underwear with coughing, sneezing, exercises (aerobics), etc. The problem is uncommon at night during sleep and when lying down. It is very common during and after pregnancy. Occasionally SUI is very severe and the person is continuously wet with minimal activity.

The situation is always worse with a full bladder. Therefore, make it a point to empty out the bladder regularly, e.g. every 2 hours and especially before exercise or other physical activity. Caffeine and spicy foods can aggravate the problem as well.

Kegel exercises can build up the muscles around the opening of the vagina which form the floor of the pelvis (the perineum) and support the bladder, vagina and rectum. When done regularly, Kegel's can definitely improve urinary control.

What causes stress incontinence?

Your pelvic floor muscles can become stretched and slack as a result of childbirth, aging, or a hereditary weakness. The sagging muscles change the relationship between your bladder and urethra, which allows urine to leak.

If you have gone through menopause and have low levels of the female hormone estrogen, you may develop stress incontinence because of decreased tone in the urethra and surrounding tissue.

Also, stress incontinence can be caused by problems such as diabetes, obesity, and long term and frequent urinary tract infections.

How do you do Kegel exercises?

This exercise is very important and should not be forgotten! It strengthens the pelvic floor muscles. Muscle tissue becomes more and more elastic the more we use it.

- First, practice starting and stopping your urine stream while urinating so that it is clear which muscles you will use for these exercises. You do not need to continue to do this once you have identified these muscles.

- When you are not urinating, tighten your pelvic floor muscles as if to stop yourself from urinating. Isolate just the pelvic floor muscles. Hold these muscles as tight as possible. Be sure to breathe. Sustain this contraction for 10-20 seconds. If you feel the contraction fading away, even without deliberately letting go, consciously bring it back. Try not to tighten the abdominal muscles.
- Kegels are more effective if done one at a time.

You will find that you cannot entirely separate these muscles; there will always be some muscle fibers in front and some in back that seem to tighten spontaneously with the ones you are trying to concentrate on. Do the exercise a minimum of 10 times over the course of a day.

Performing fewer repetitions than this will lower the effectiveness of the exercises. You may have to do the exercises faithfully for 2 to 3 months before you notice any improvement.

You can do Kegel exercises anywhere: while sitting at a desk, waiting for a bus, washing dishes, driving a car, waiting in line, or watching television, etc. No one will know you are doing them.

Are there any other benefits of Kegel exercises?

An added benefit of Kegel exercises is that they also improve vaginal muscle tone and sensation, often allowing you to be more sexually responsive.

Role of Menopause in SUI:

After menopause (cessation of menstrual periods, usually age 50-55) the ovaries stop production of estrogens (female hormone). Lack of estrogen can result in a weakening and relaxation of the perineal muscles. Therefore, after the menopause SUI can become more severe.

“Repair” operations can be done to replace and support the bladder and correct SUI. Surgery is seldom done before menopause. When and if to proceed with surgery requires thoughtful consideration by the patient and careful discussion with her gynecologist.

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**The muscles form a figure 8
Around the perineal body.**