

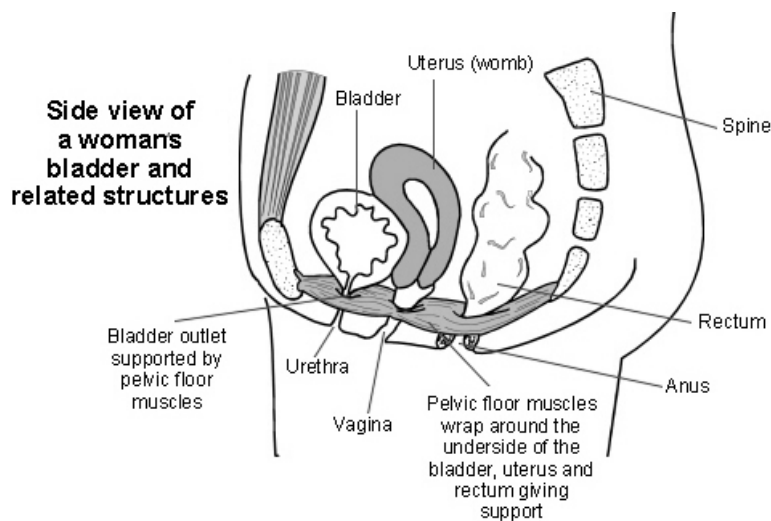


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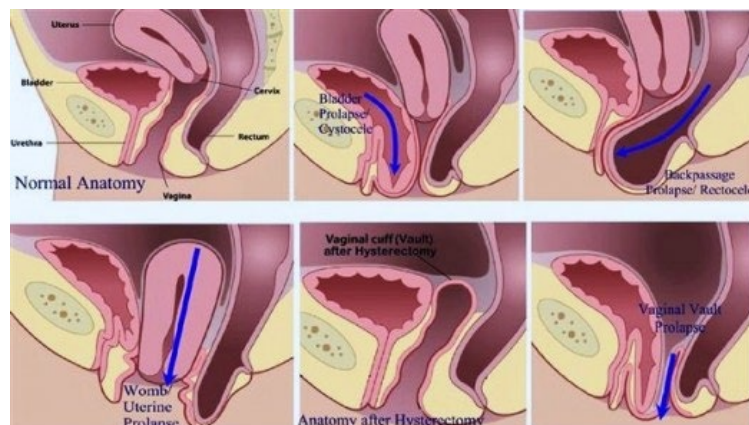
Protecting your Pelvic Floor Muscles

Your pelvic floor muscles (Kegel muscles) are the sling of muscles at the base of your pelvis that support your pelvic organs, help maintain bladder and bowel control and maintain healthy sexual function.

These muscles are affected by any increase in pressure in the abdomen eg. Pregnancy, childbirth, lifting heavy objects including weight lifting, abdominal or pelvic surgery, chronic constipation, or a chronic cough.

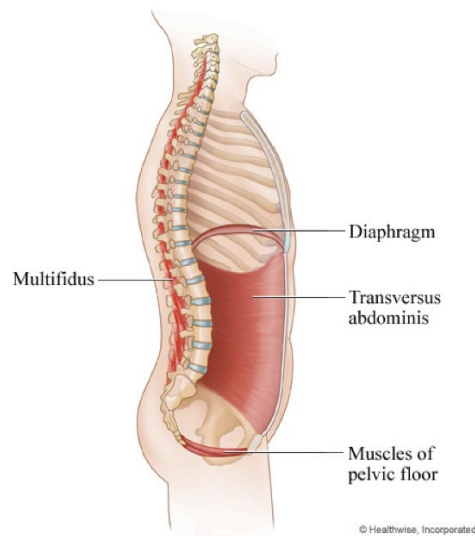


Did you know that one in three women who have ever had a baby leak urine to some degree at various times. Incontinence is therefore a common condition but it is important to know something can be done to help. Similarly weakened pelvic floor muscles can result in the “sagging” down of the pelvic organs into the vagina – known as **pelvic organ prolapse** (bladder, bowel or uterus). Again, strengthening the pelvic floor muscles and using them during activities will help reduce these problems.



Core muscles

Learning how to find these muscles and use them will help to minimize the impact additional downward pressure has on them eg. pregnancy, childbirth, lifting, exercising etc. As these muscles are part of your “core” muscles, correct use will also help to protect your abdominal and back muscles so you will be able to minimize pain and, if you are pregnant, help you get back into shape more easily post pregnancy.



Your “**core**” **muscles** provide a “cylinder of support” to stabilize the centre of our body thereby upwards supporting our back and neck and downwards supporting our knees and ankles. Our core is made up of our diaphragm, small back muscles (multifidus), our deep abdominal muscles (transversus abdominis) and our pelvic floor muscles. They all work together as deep posture support muscles to prevent pain and injury. Injury to one will affect the function of the others. We must therefore make sure these muscles are working again following “injury” eg. pregnancy, childbirth, back/pelvic pain, abdominal surgery, chronic breathing problems or long term poor posture.

When you tighten your pelvic floor muscles you should automatically feel a gentle tightening in your lower abdominal muscles (transversus abdominis) just above your pubic bone – **not** a big “suck in” of your upper abdominals but just a gentle pulling in of below your belly button. You can feel these muscles by placing your fingers just inside your hip bones at the front and just concentrate on contracting your pelvic floor muscles (refer below) and you will gradually feel these lower abdominals automatically involved. You may do this in any position - lying, sitting or standing. Starting in lying with knees bent is easier. Remember to keep breathing normally, do not hold your breath.

How to do Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises (Kegel Exercises)

Lie on your back with your knees bent and hip width apart or resting over two pillows.

You need to exercise these muscles in three ways:

1. Strong holds – strengthen the muscle: Keeping your bottom, upper abdominal and leg muscles **relaxed**, as strongly as possible draw in and lift up the muscles around your front passage, vagina and back passage as if

stopping the flow of urine and wind. Try to hold this squeeze and lift for as long as you can up to 10 seconds then relax completely. Repeat up to 10 times. Relax between each contraction for 4 seconds. Make sure you breathe normally whilst doing these exercises – **do not** hold your breath.

2. Quick recruitment – helps the muscle contract quickly before you cough, sneeze etc: Using the same technique as above, more quickly recruit your pelvic floor muscles and hold for only **one** second, then relax completely. Repeat up to 10 times. Remember to breathe normally. Don't rush but feel the difference between contracted and relaxed.
3. Endurance holds – so you can hold for a period of time as you lift, carry, exercise etc. Use the same technique as for strong holds (above) and continue to hold the contraction for up to 60 seconds then relax completely. It will take you time to build up to easily holding for 60 seconds and you may have to concentrate on your strong holds and quick recruitment for some time first before moving on to these endurance holds. Repeat 1-2 times. Remember to breathe normally.

Do **three** sets of the strong and quick holds each day. Once you feel confident with using these muscles progress to doing these exercises while sitting then standing. Also progress to include the endurance holds in each set.

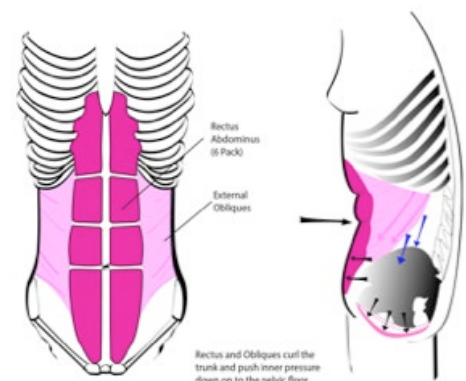
Test that you are using the right muscles by trying to stop/slow the flow of urine. This is a test only so **DO NOT** do the exercises this way as it can place strain on your bladder. Another **test** is to use a mirror to look at, or feel your perineum (the area between your vagina and back passage) and see it pull up inside you when you contract these muscles and then relax back down as you let go of the contraction.

Important: Make sure you **DO NOT** push down with a contraction – this will further weaken your pelvic floor muscles. Remember your muscles have weakened downwards slightly and you are trying to pull them back up with this exercise.

Now use them!

Of equal importance to strengthening these muscles is to use them when you need them! Any activity that increases abdominal pressure – especially if you are pregnant and already have increased abdominal pressure – will push down onto the pelvic floor muscles and weaken them more.

So every time you bend, lift, carry heavy objects, cough, sneeze, lift weights, do sit-ups etc make sure you protect these muscles by contracting them before and during these activities – that is, draw in and up and hold. This is why you must be able to breathe normally while you contract your pelvic floor muscles.



Going to the toilet without straining

Another way pelvic floor muscles are weakened is by pushing down as you strain to empty your bowels. This is a big problem if you suffer from chronic constipation. Constipation is common in pregnancy so please talk to our dietitian to help you manage your diet and a specialist physiotherapist who will show you how to use your bowels without pushing.

To strain less always go to the toilet when you have the urge, do not delay and sit as follows –

- Sit on the toilet and rest your feet on a low stool or toilet rolls so your knees are higher than your hips.
- Lean forward to rest your elbows on your knees as you straighten your back.
- Relax your breathing, let your abdominal muscles flop outwards and relax your pelvic floor muscles.
- This position helps your bladder and bowel to empty more easily.
- To empty your bowels take deep breaths in and out through an open mouth as you let your abdominal muscles bulge **outwards** into your hand. **Do not** tighten your tummy by pulling it inwards.
- Use your open mouth breaths to increase pressure in your abdomen and downwards towards your anus. This way you are not holding your breath and pushing down straining your pelvic floor muscles.
- When you have finished tighten (draw in and lift up) your pelvic floor muscles to reposition them.



How strong are my pelvic floor muscles?

Sometimes it will take 3-4 months of regular pelvic floor muscle exercises to regain their strength. To check how you are progressing try to stop the flow of urine midstream. You should be able to either completely, or almost, stop the flow of urine. *Remember this is only a test – **do not** do your exercises this way.*

Also after 3-4 months try a stress test – with a reasonably full bladder do 20 jumps (legs slightly apart), 4 star jumps and three strong coughs. If you are dry you can gradually return to high impact sports but be guided by your own body.

Once you feel your pelvic floor muscles are back to normal then maintain their strength by:

1. Doing **6 maximal contractions (draw in, lift and hold as strong as possible) held for 6 seconds, 3 times each day** – maybe while you wash your hands after the toilet you can do 3 contractions so by the end of the day you have done enough;
2. Most importantly remember to **protect your pelvic floor** from weakening by contracting them and holding while you bend, lift, carry heavy objects, cough, sneeze, do sit ups etc. So even if you don't have time to do exercises every day, you will be exercising them during your daily life! It is regular pressure down that weakens these muscles and can result in pelvic organ prolapse or incontinence.

This should be a part of your daily routine – FOR LIFE!!

If you are still concerned then it is important that you talk to your doctor or women's health physiotherapist. If you treat incontinence or pelvic organ prolapse early then long term problems can be avoided.