

# Exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles for women

Physiotherapy Department

Information for Patients

Produced: July 2021

Review: July 2024

Leaflet number: 236 Version: 3

## What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles in the pelvis. They are quite literally the floor on which everything rests.

They run from your pubic bone at the front to your tailbone at the back and in between your sitting bones.

Many women experience symptoms of pelvic floor (PF) weakness and whilst this is very common it is not something that should be accepted as 'normal'. Many women do find that their symptoms improve with the right help.

## What are the symptoms of a weak pelvic floor?

Symptoms of pelvic floor weakness include:

- leakage of urine, for example when coughing, laughing, sneezing, running or jumping.
- needing to go to the toilet quickly and often (urgency and frequency).
- vaginal or pelvic heaviness/ discomfort.
- reduced feeling (sensitivity) during sex.

This leaflet contains exercises that can strengthen the pelvic floor muscles and help reduce any leakage of urine during your normal activities.

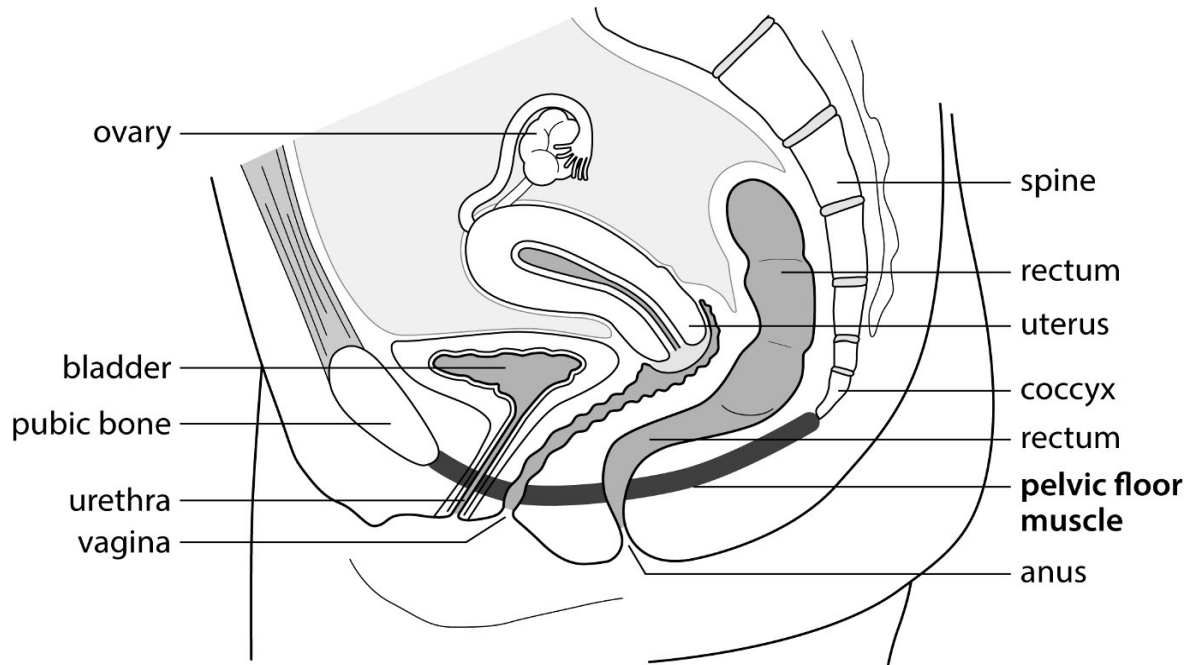
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## Female pelvic floor

### The Pelvic Floor

Lateral (side) view



### What do the pelvic floor muscles do?

- Supports the bladder, womb (uterus) and the bowel.
- Closes the tube which runs from your bladder (urethra) to stop urine leaking out by accident.
- Stops leakage of urine and faeces during coughing, sneezing, running or lifting heavy objects.
- Helps stabilise the bones of the pelvis.
- Your pelvic floor muscles should be able to relax to help you empty your bladder and bowel.
- Increased sexual satisfaction for you and your partner.

### What can make the pelvic floor muscles weak?

The pelvic floor muscles can become weak for many reasons. Some of the most common are:

- Getting older and particularly in menopause.
- Pregnancy/ childbirth.
- From long-term coughing.
- Constipation that lasts a long time or happens often.
- Long periods of inactivity due to illness.
- Pelvic and abdominal surgery.
- Being overweight.

## What can I do to strengthen these muscles?

Regular pelvic floor exercise is the most effective way to achieving a strong pelvic floor and in most cases this is enough to reduce or resolve some symptoms.

If you are exercising effectively and **regularly** you should start to notice some change at around 8 weeks but it will take 4 to 6 months to get the full benefit.

## Pelvic floor exercises

### To help you find the correct muscles:

Imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine. The feeling is one of 'squeeze and lift', closing and drawing up the back and front passages.

It is important not to cheat by tightening your tummy or buttocks, squeezing your legs together or holding your breath. Remember to always breathe out as you cough.

You should practice these exercises **4** times every day. It is important to do both of the exercises given below to get the best result from these exercises.

### Long holds:

This exercise will help if 1 or more of your organs in the pelvis have slipped down from their normal position (prolapse), or you struggle to get to the toilet on time for your bladder or bowels:

- Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles as tightly as you can, for as long as you can for up to 10 seconds.
- Completely release and rest for at least 4 seconds.
- If you do not feel the muscles release, rest for a little longer to make sure you are fully relaxed or hold for less time and build up to 10 seconds.
- Repeat up to 10 times in a row or until your muscles are tired.

### Short squeezes:

This exercise will help if you have stress incontinence i.e. leaking urine with coughing, sneezing, running, jumping or lifting.

- Do 10 short, quick squeezes, fully relaxing between each one.

**Don't try these exercises while passing urine. This may lead to urine infections or urinary retention.**

## Tips to get the most out of your exercises

- No one can see when you are doing these exercises, so you can easily fit them into your daily life.
- Give the exercises your full attention so that you are working them as hard as you can
- You can exercise in any position. Start by lying down, or on your side, or sitting if the muscles are weak. Try doing the exercises while standing up as you get stronger.
- Space the exercises out so you are doing them regularly throughout the day. Use prompts to remind you e.g. do them after meal times or after going to the toilet.
- Breathe normally whilst doing your exercises.

## Tips to help manage your pelvic floor symptoms

- Squeeze the pelvic floor just before you cough, laugh or lift anything heavy. This can reduce the amount of urine leakage, and can help strengthen the pelvic floor muscles at the same time.
- The pelvic floor muscle tightens better when your back is straight, so try not to bend from your back when you cough. Try to bend from the hips when you need to cough.
- Avoid high impact exercises which can make your symptoms worse, such as running and jumping.
- Continue with low impact exercises such as walking, cycling and swimming.
- Avoid going to the toilet 'just in case'.
- Avoid constipation and straining on the toilet.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Stop smoking.
- Keep a healthy weight.

## When can I stop doing the exercises?

If you stop exercising you will lose some of the strength and may notice an increase in your symptoms again. This can be noticeable in as little as 1 week.

Once you have been exercising for around 4 to 6 months and find that your symptoms have improved, you should maintain this strength by doing 1 set of pelvic floor exercises in a challenging position at least once a day.

## Can I be referred to a physiotherapist?

If your symptoms are getting worse, or if you are unsure if you are doing the exercises correctly, please ask your GP to refer you to a physiotherapist in the Pelvic Health Service.

Your physiotherapist will assess your pelvic floor strength and stamina, and advise you on an exercise programme to follow. They will tell you how many times a day to do the exercises. You can do these from various positions, including when standing and walking.

There are other treatments available that can be used alongside pelvic floor exercises to help you achieve the results you want.

Ask your physiotherapist to tell you about phone apps which are available to help with pelvic floor exercises.

## Contact details

Physiotherapy Department - Leicester General Hospital: 0116 258 4070

### Reference:

<https://pogp.csp.org.uk/publications/pelvic-floor-muscle-exercises-women>

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