Pelvic Floor Exercises for Women

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What are pelvic floor muscles?

They are layers of muscles stretching like a hammock from the pubic joint at the front of the pelvis to the coccyx and sacrum at the back of the pelvis. They are firm and supportive, helping to hold the bowel, bladder and uterus in place and closing the outlets of the bladder and bowel. When you pass urine or have a bowel motion, the pelvic floor muscles relax. After emptying, they tighten again to restore control.

Why do pelvic floor exercises?

Weakness of the pelvic floor muscles can be a common problem affecting 1 in 3 women by middle age, resulting in incontinence and prolapse.

This may be due to being overweight, post pregnancy/childbirth, pelvic surgery or simply getting older. Incontinence can affect your bladder and/or bowel.

These exercises are important for all women, particularly if you:

- leak on coughing, sneezing, laughing or physical exertion
- leak before reaching the toilet
- are of child-bearing years
- are menopausal
Finding the pelvic floor muscles

Sit comfortably on a firm chair with your knees slightly apart or lie down.

- Tighten your back passage – as if you are stopping yourself passing wind. Do not squeeze your buttocks or leg muscles.
- Tighten your vagina and front passage – as if you are trying to stop the flow of urine. Try to feel the muscles lifting upwards and forwards towards the pubic bone.
- **Feel the muscles working together, then relax.**
- Tighten the pelvic floor muscles as above and hold this. How many seconds can you hold? Aim for 5 seconds – when you let go, can you feel the muscles relax? If not, you have held too long – try again with a shorter hold. Some women may be able to hold for only 1-2 seconds and others as many as 8-10 seconds. It is important to discover **your** hold time.
Pelvic floor exercises
In sitting – as before:

**Exercise 1- slow pull-ups**

Tighten the pelvic floor muscles slowly. Continue to tighten for your length of hold, relax, and feel the muscle let go. Rest for the same number of seconds. Repeat this 5 times. As it gets easier, gradually increase length of hold and number of repeats, aiming for 10 seconds.

**Exercise 2 - fast pull-ups**

Tighten the pelvic floor muscles quickly. Let go straight away. Repeat this 10 times – approximately 1 contraction per second.

**Pelvic floor exercise routine**

Do exercise 1 and 2 at each session. **As soon as you can, increase to 10 slow and 10 fast pull-ups.** Aim to repeat each session at least 3 times each day.

As your muscles get stronger you may progress to doing the exercises in standing as well as in sitting or lying.

Do not expect immediate improvement – so do not give up. You need to continue this routine for at least 6 months. As the muscles get stronger you will be able to increase your hold time and number of repetitions at each session.

**Do not practice stopping the flow of urine midstream.**
Exercise for life

- Continue pelvic floor exercise several times per day for the rest of your life in order to keep these muscles fit and healthy. If symptoms return increase your daily input again.

- **Try to get in the habit of tightening your pelvic floor muscles before you cough, sneeze or lift anything.**

- If your problem is ‘urgency’ (needing to get to the toilet quickly), tighten your pelvic floor muscles when you get the desire to empty your bladder; wait until the desire passes before moving.

Additional tips

Being constipated or overweight can strain the pelvic floor muscles so eat a balanced diet including fruit and vegetables and drink between 6 and 8 cups of fluid a day. Avoid tea, coffee or coca-cola if you suffer from urgency or frequency.

Specialist referral

If you have difficulty in identifying your pelvic floor muscles and have symptoms of incontinence discuss this with your consultant or GP who can refer you to a physiotherapist who specialises in Women’s Health problems.
References


If you or the individual you are caring for need support reading this leaflet please ask a member of staff for advice.

© North Bristol NHS Trust. This edition published February 2015. Review due May 2017. NBT002529