

Pelvic Floor Muscles and Incontinence

Information Sheet

The pelvic floor muscles consist of a number of muscles which form a sling at the base of the body from the pubic bone to the tail bone. Like the other muscles in your body they respond to exercise and can increase in strength and endurance.

The importance of keeping the pelvic floor muscles toned

- ⇒ They support the lower abdominal organs such as the uterus, bladder and bowel. Keeping the muscles strong can help to prevent prolapse (where an organ moves out of position) of the bowel and uterus.
- ⇒ They provide a base of support for the spine to sit on.
- ⇒ Keeping the pelvic floor toned is helpful in childbirth.
- ⇒ Keeping the pelvic floor strong can prevent incontinence (depending on what causes the incontinence).
- ⇒ Increased sexual satisfaction.



Causes of weak pelvic floor muscles

- Childbirth
- Obesity
- Chronic coughing
- Constipation and regularly straining
- Pelvic or prostate surgery
- Menopause (decreased oestrogen can reduce elasticity of muscles)
- Neurological damage eg stroke or spinal injury
- Persistent heavy lifting can strain and weaken the pelvic floor

What you can do

There are 3 openings in the pelvic floor of women (urethra, vagina and anus), which are each controlled by different muscles. At first you may find you just have to tighten any thing down there; however over time you will be able to isolate the different muscles, and just tighten the muscles around the vagina or just the anus for example. Give yourself plenty of time to become familiar with using these muscles.

- ▶ When you tighten, do it inwards and upwards rather than out and downwards – think of “squeeze and lift”.
- ▶ There’s no need to use maximum strength, keep it fairly gentle - quality of movement not quantity is more useful here. Remember, no straining.
- ▶ At first you may want to practice the exercises lying on your side, back or sitting, so that your other muscles are as relaxed a possible and you can focus on the pelvic floor. After a while you can try contracting the pelvic floor in functional positions such as standing, walking, and lifting. Or even in situations where leakage is most likely – such as when coughing or sneezing.
- ▶ It ok for your tummy muscles to work while doing the exercises, however avoid using the thighs and buttock muscles.
- ▶ See if you can hold the contraction for 10 seconds – if not keep trying to lift it back up as the contraction fades away (like going up an elevator or lift). See if you can do 10 in a row like that. After some months of practice aim to do 10 more.
After that do 10 short, fast, strong squeezes.
- ▶ Remember to keep breathing.
- ▶ Do them once or twice a day if possible. It’s a good idea to practice the exercises regularly, so if you find it hard to find the time, you can utilize situations like red traffic lights, washing dishes and supermarket queues to practice – the exercises are internal and shouldn’t be visible to someone else.
- ▶ If you are standing all day, its best not to do so much at night – keep it light and don’t expect to feel as strong – the muscles can be tired from supporting the abdominal contents all day. If possible do your exercises in the morning.
- ▶ If you cannot feel your pelvic floor muscles or they are very weak, you may want to see a women’s health physiotherapist.

Exercises

- ▶ To use the front part of the pelvic floor (hole 1 and urethra) see if you can slow down or stop the flow of urine when going to toilet (do only once a day maximum).
- ▶ To use the back part of the pelvic floor (hole 3 and anus), contract the anus – what you would do if you were trying to stop yourself passing wind. Try not to use the buttock muscles. Notice whether you are tightening around the vagina as well – is it possible to isolate the anus? (remember at first it may not be).
- ▶ To use the middle part of pelvic floor (hole 2 and vagina), imagine you have a diamond necklace inside your vagina and someone is trying to steal it. Squeeze around the diamonds to lift them higher inside.
- ▶ All together: squeeze around your front and back passage and then lift up everything inwards and upwards – hold approx 10 seconds.

The pelvic floor during a Yoga-Cise class

You will notice that we often incorporate tightening of the pelvic floor muscles into the exercises we do in class. We sometimes refer to this tightening as Moolabandha (which is a yogic term that specifically refers to the tightening of the muscles around the vagina).

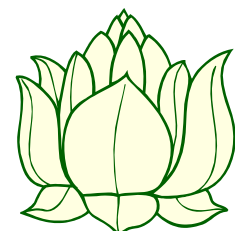
Yogically, this practice is said to increase energy levels and relieve tension.

Traditionally in yoga, tightening of the Moolabandha/pelvic floor is done on the inhalation and relaxing on the exhalation.

However, if you suffer from incontinence its best to tighten the pelvic floor on the exhalation and relax on the inhalation. Or you can hold the tightness as you breathe in and out.

If you don't feel safe doing any of these exercises in a class situation then miss them out and practice them in at home instead until you feel more in comfortable/in control.

You can be aware of the pelvic floor when doing many of the exercises – particularly abdominal work. When you tighten the belly and draw that in you can also tighten your pelvic floor muscles. Using Moolabandha can provide more energy and give you more strength.



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Posture and the pelvic floor

How you sit in a chair effects the pelvic floor. If you sit to the back of the chair, there is a tendency to slouch, and this causes the abdominal contents to put more pressure on the front of the sacrum and anus resulting in a weakening of the front part of the pelvic floor (the back part remains relatively strong). If you lean forward the pressure comes off the anus and is transferred onto the front, thus weakening the anus and strengthening the front.



You can try this out for yourself:

- ⇒ Sit relatively straight and contract your pelvic floor in and upwards a few times – notice what it feels like.
- ⇒ Then deliberately slouch and tighten the pelvic floor again – does the back passage feel stronger compared to the front?
- ⇒ Then lean forward a bit so your head is over your knees and try contracting again – does the front passage feel stronger than the back?

Somewhere in between these two extremes should be a happy medium – where the weight is distributed evenly and the pelvic floor is working most efficiently.

The condition and co-ordination of the pelvis reflects the condition of the pelvic floor. Thus working on releasing the pelvis and improving its range of movement and coordination will benefit the workings of your pelvic floor.

Other things you can try to complement pelvic floor exercises

- Increase fluid and fibre in your diet to avoid constipation and maintain a healthy bladder.
- Lose weight if you need to.
- Keep fit and particularly focus on keeping the pelvis mobile.



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