



**University Hospitals  
Bristol and Weston**  
NHS Foundation Trust

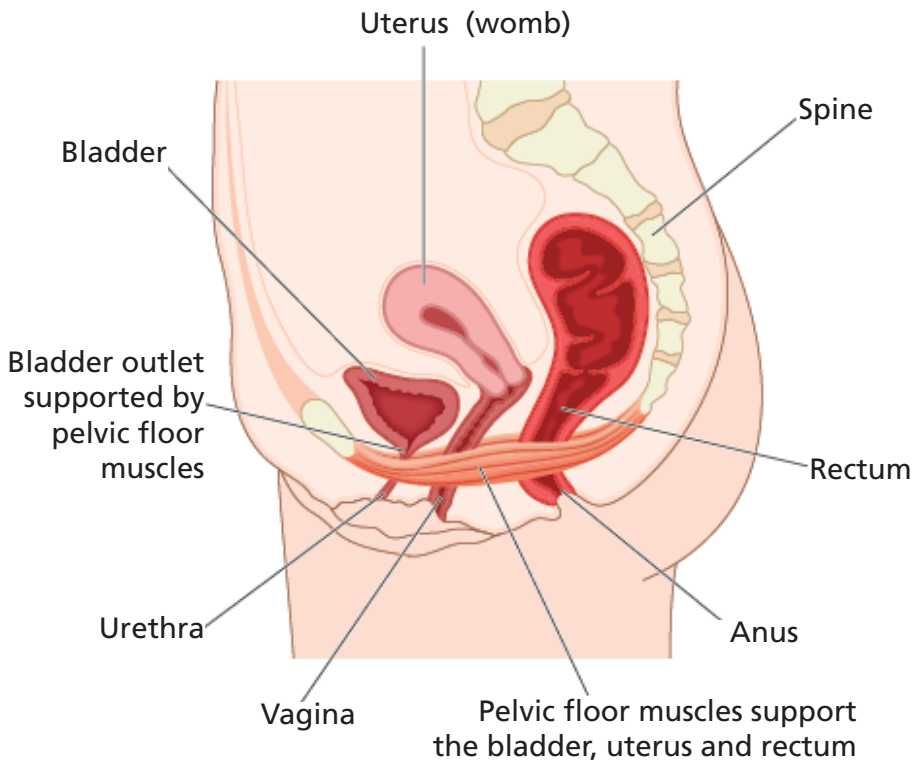
Patient information service  
**St Michael's Hospital**

# **Pelvic floor exercises and continence advice for women**



The pelvic floor muscles form a sling across the base of the pelvis. They are attached to the pubic bone at the front of the pelvis, the bones at the sides and the tailbone (coccyx) at the back.

There are three openings in women. One at the front from the bladder called the urethra. One in the middle, the vagina and one at the back from the bowel called the anus.



# Functions of the pelvic floor

- Help to keep your pelvic openings (anus, urethra) closed to prevent incontinence.
- Support the bladder, womb, and bowels to help prevent prolapse.
- Assist in stabilizing the joints of your pelvis.
- Work with the abdominal muscles to support the spine and help with maintaining good posture.
- Help with sexual function.

# Why pelvic floor exercises (Kegels) are important

If you are having problems with bladder or bowel control or prolapse (your internal organs moving down) then doing these exercises may help to relieve your symptoms as, like any other muscle in the body, these muscles may have become weak.

If you are not sure that your problem is weak muscles or that these exercises are right for you then please read the information at the end of this leaflet on page 11.

# How to find your pelvic floor muscles

If you are unsure how to do a pelvic floor exercise, then start by either sitting forwards with your elbows on your knees or lying down with your knees bent and your legs slightly apart.

- Now tighten your pelvic floor muscles around your anus as if you are trying to stop your wind or gas escaping.
- Feel this tightening continue upwards and forwards, like an

escalator, towards your pubic bone at the front of your body. You should feel a squeeze at the front of your pelvic floor muscles, as if you are trying to stop the flow of pee.

- Now let your muscles completely relax back down. This relaxation is an especially important part of pelvic floor exercises.

While you are doing this exercise check that you are not holding your breath or have a feeling that you are pushing down.

It is also important not to clench your buttock muscles, squeeze your thighs together and strongly pull in your tummy as this means you are using the wrong muscles.

However, you may notice that your lower tummy muscles gently tighten when you complete the pelvic floor contraction. This is normal because both muscles work together.

**Never repeatedly stop and start your pee flow as an exercise. This is not a good way to exercise your muscles and may harm the way your bladder empties.**

## **Pelvic floor relaxation**

It is important to fully relax your muscles before and after each exercise to ensure that the muscles work through their full range of movement.

The relaxation should feel like the muscles expand and release.

Relaxation happens most easily as you breathe in fully to your ribs, back, tummy and all the way down to your pelvic floor.

As you breathe into your diaphragm your tummy should expand and soften - this promotes full relaxation of the pelvic floor.

If you cannot feel your muscles relaxing, you may need further help with your exercises. Please see the information at the end of this leaflet.

## **Pelvic floor exercise routine**

When you are confident you can feel your muscles lift, squeeze, and relax correctly then you are ready to start exercising your pelvic floor muscles.

**There are two exercises for pelvic floor muscles, long holds and fast squeezes, and you should do both each time you do an exercise session.**

### **Exercise one**

To strengthen them to help support your internal organs.

- Lift and squeeze and hold them for as long as **you** can (up to 10 seconds).
- Then let them fully relax down and have a rest before you repeat doing this exercise again (up to 10 times).

### **Exercise two**

- To teach them to react quickly to stop you leaking when you cough or sneeze.
- Tighten your muscles as before but this time pull up **fast**.
- Then let them completely relax down before repeating this fast exercise again (up to 10 times).

# How to improve

Every time you do an exercise session you should try to do each exercise until your muscles tire.

Start with short holds of a few seconds and repeat a few times. Then slowly build up the length of time you can hold your muscles lifted up and the number of times you can repeat this.

If you can only hold for a few seconds, give yourself a longer rest period between these lifts so that your muscles do not fatigue too quickly.

Start off with a few quick pull ups. Aim to increase the number and the speed of these contractions.

- **You should aim to be able to do 10 long holds, each held for 10 seconds, and 10 fast exercises.**
- Remember to progress your starting position - starting position from lying down, then to sitting, then to standing and then in functional positions such as walking, bending over, and jumping.
- If your muscles are very weak you may need to continue to lie down to feel your muscles properly working. However, change your starting position to sitting as soon as your exercise becomes easier.
- NICE guidelines recommended you do these exercises 3 times a day.
- It takes time to build up your pelvic floor muscles, but over the next 3 to 5 months you should start to feel your muscles improve and strengthen and your symptoms reduce.

# The knack

To prevent leakage of pee, tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you laugh, cough, sneeze, lift , push, pull, jump, blow your nose or shout.

This functional use of your pelvic floor muscles is often referred to as 'The knack'.

## Further exercise advice

- It is important you find time to regularly practice your exercises.

Consider using a pelvic floor app. One example is NHS Squeezy.

Alternatively set reminders on your phone or associate your exercises with regular daily activities for example after going to the toilet, or at mealtimes.

- Do not rush your exercises. A few done 'here and there' will not give you as good results as regular exercise sessions.
- If you are struggling to find time, then start off once a day and aim to build up to three times a day.
- Once your pelvic floor has strengthened and your symptoms have reduced you should continue doing your exercises, for the rest of your life. Otherwise your muscles could weaken again, and your symptoms may return.
- One idea some of our patients have found useful is they remember to do these exercises each day after they clean their teeth or when they are in the shower.

## Continence advice

- Being overweight puts an additional strain on your pelvic floor which can then cause problems with prolapse, stress incontinence and urgency (rushing to the toilet). Losing weight can help improve continence problems.
- Chronic constipation and straining also puts increasing pressure downwards onto the pelvic floor. If you find it difficult to do a poo easily then make a pad of toilet paper and support your perineum (area between your legs) with your hand. Raising your feet on a small footrest whilst on the toilet can often help.
- Straight leg sit ups and double leg lifts puts severe pressure on the pelvic floor (and your back) and should not be done when you have pelvic floor weakness.
- Until your muscles are stronger, avoid any activity with high impact (anything that involves both feet off the ground at the same time).
- If you have symptoms of prolapse then try to minimise heavy lifting. If you must lift, then breathe out as you do so as this reduces downward internal pressure..... "Exhale with effort".
- Aim to drink 6 to 8 glasses (3 to 4 pints or 1 ½ to 2 litres) of fluid a day. Do not reduce your fluid intake as this could be harmful to the bladder.
- Always sit on a toilet, do not hover over it as then it is more difficult to relax your pelvic floor muscles to pee to completion.



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# Bladder urgency and frequency

- It is important to completely empty your bladder, without straining, each time you go to the toilet. Pee left inside the bladder may irritate the bladder lining and the need to pee frequently. It may help to lean forwards as you pee.
- Avoid going to the toilet 'just in case' as this can reduce the capacity of the bladder, as it gets used to holding less. You may then find you are needing to pee more often.
- If you go to the toilet more often than every two hours, unless you have a medical reason for this, then try to train your bladder to wait longer. If you feel the urge to empty your bladder soon after doing a pee, then try the following deference techniques.
  - a. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles a few times.
  - b. Sit on something hard such as the arm of a chair.
  - c. Distract your mind, for example hum a tune, count to 10 again and again.
  - d. Once the urgency has reduced try and walk slowly and calmly to the toilet. Rushing makes urgency worse.

Urgency and frequency can also be helped by avoiding known bladder irritants for example drinks containing caffeine such as coffee, cola, and tea.

- Fizzy and acidic drinks can also irritate the bladder and some people's bladders are sensitive to artificial sweeteners.
- Trying to drink less fluids does not help urgency and frequency. If you only drink a small amount, then your pee will be too concentrated, and this will make you need to visit the toilet more. Pee should be a pale yellow colour.

# Important

We suggest you seek further advice by seeing a pelvic floor specialist if you have any of the problems listed below.

- You are not sure that you are doing your pelvic floor exercises correctly.
- You are not sure that your problem is weak pelvic floor muscles.
- You think you cannot relax your muscles well.
- You have seen no improvement in your symptoms in eight weeks despite regularly doing pelvic floor exercises.
- You are seeing no improvement at all when trying to manage bladder and/or bowel urgency and frequency.
- You are experiencing pain in your abdomen, pelvic floor muscles or pelvis whilst doing the pelvic floor exercises.

This can be done by self-referring to our department by using our self referral leaflet 'Problems with your bladder or pelvic floor muscles' which is available from <http://foi.avon.nhs.uk/>.

## Other information and leaflets you may find useful

### UHBW patient information leaflets

<http://foi.avon.nhs.uk/download.aspx?did=6329>

- **Tips for your bowel problems**



### Pelvic, Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy

<https://thepogp.co.uk/resources/booklets/>

- **The pelvic floor muscles - a guide for women**
- **Improving your bowel function**



### NICE guidelines NG123 2019

- **Management of urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse in women**



As well as providing clinical care, our Trust has an important role in research. This allows us to discover new and improved ways of treating patients.

While under our care, you may be invited to take part in research. To find out more please visit: [www.uhbw.nhs.uk](http://www.uhbw.nhs.uk)

Help us prevent the spread of infection in hospital. Please make sure your hands are clean. Wash and dry them thoroughly/use the gel provided. If you have been unwell in the last 48 hours please consider whether your visit is essential.

Smoking is the primary cause of preventable illness and premature death. For support in stopping smoking contact **NHS Smokefree on 0300 123 1044.**

Drinkline is the national alcohol helpline. If you're worried about your own or someone else's drinking, you can call this free helpline in complete confidence. **Drinkline on 0300 123 1110.**

For access all patient leaflets and information please go to the following address:  
<http://foi.avon.nhs.uk/>

**Bristol switchboard: 0117 923 0000**  
**Weston switchboard: 01934 636 363**  
**[www.uhbw.nhs.uk](http://www.uhbw.nhs.uk)**



For an interpreter or signer please contact the telephone number on your appointment letter.



For this leaflet in large print or PDF format, please email [patientleaflets@uhbw.nhs.uk](mailto:patientleaflets@uhbw.nhs.uk).

