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## Information for Patients

# Pelvic Floor Exercises for Women

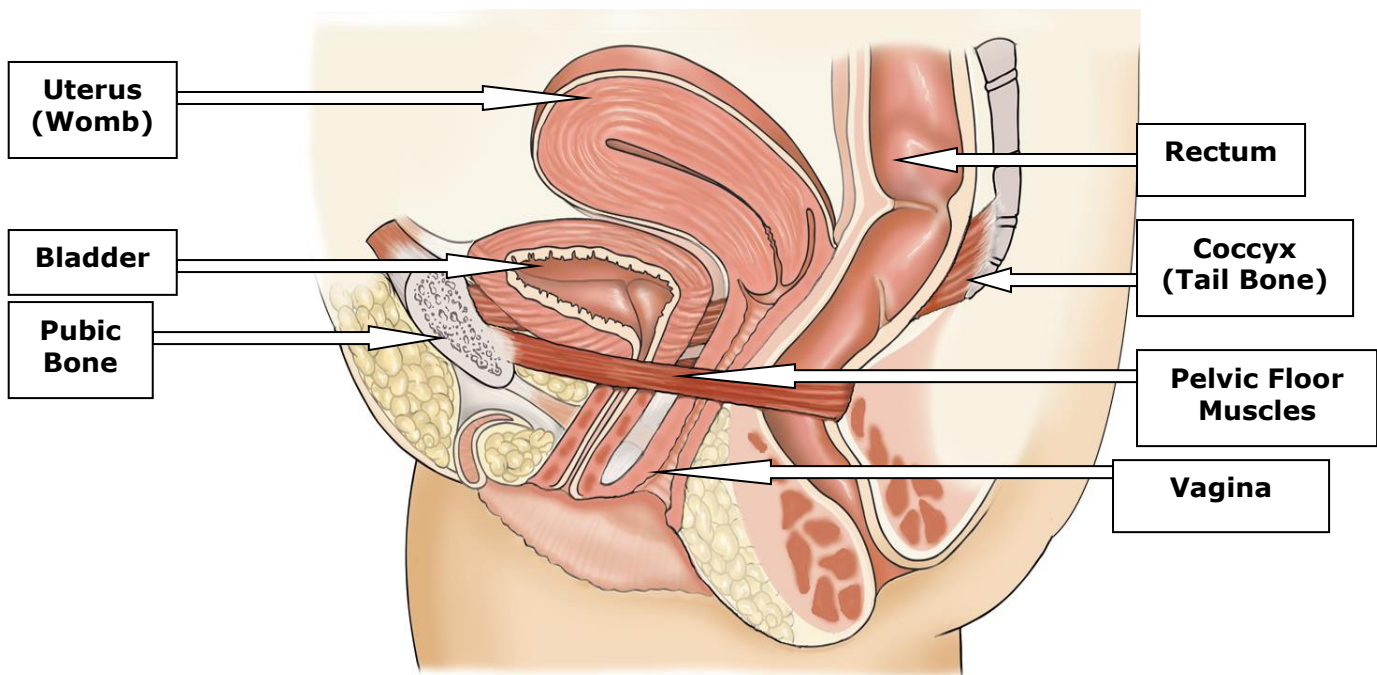
## Physiotherapy Service

### Introduction

This leaflet tells you how to exercise and strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. These muscles form a broad sling running from front to back and as their name suggests, they form the floor of your pelvis.

Strong pelvic floor muscles are essential for good bladder and bowel control. They help to prevent/ improve a prolapse and may improve your sex life. They also work closely with your abdominal (tummy) muscles to support and stabilise your spine.

Left side view of a woman's pelvic floor muscles and related structures.



### Symptoms

Your pelvic floor muscles need to be strong and firm. If they become weak, you might have leakage from your bladder or bowel when you cough, sneeze, laugh, exercise, lift or bend (*stress incontinence*). You might have a desperate need to empty your bladder or bowel (*urgency*) or you could sometimes fail to reach the toilet in time (*urge incontinence*). You might need to empty your bladder more than eight times each day (*frequency*).

Another problem could be the sensation of something coming down at the birth canal or back passage (*prolapse*).

Some women can also have loss of sexual sensation during intercourse.

## **Causes**

The pelvic floor muscles can become weak or damaged as a result of:

- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Continual straining to empty the bowels
- Being overweight
- Frequent heavy lifting
- Menopausal changes
- Chronic cough
- Pelvic surgery
- Long periods of inactivity following injury or illness
- Lack of general fitness

## **The basic exercise**

Lie, sit or stand with your knees slightly apart. Tighten up your back passage as though you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind. Join in with the muscles that you would use to stop yourself from passing urine. The feeling is one of “**squeeze and lift**”, with the direction of movement going from the back passage up towards the pubic bone. Fully release the muscles back down in the direction of the tail bone.

This is called a “pelvic floor contraction”.

It is easy to use the wrong muscles instead of the pelvic floor muscles. Try not to:

- clench your buttocks
- squeeze your legs together
- hold your breath
- bear down
- squeeze too hard as other muscles may join in. However, you may feel some tightening around your lower abdomen (bikini line) – this is normal.

## **There are a few ways you can check you are doing the exercises properly.**

- You can check with a mirror. Hold a small mirror so that you can see the area between your legs. Tighten the pelvic floor muscles. The skin between the anus and vagina (perineum) should move away from the mirror.
- While sitting or lying you can put your hand gently on the area in between your vagina and back passage. You should feel movement away from your hand.

- While sitting or lying you can gently insert your thumb or index finger into your vagina. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles. You should feel the muscles move/tighten around your thumb/finger.
- During sexual intercourse, squeeze your pelvic floor muscles; your partner may be able to feel the muscles tightening.

It is very important to make sure you are using the right muscles; otherwise there may not be any improvement. You could even cause more problems. Ask for help if you are not sure that you are using the right muscles. A specialist continence physiotherapist or continence advisor can help you. See page 6 for details on how to contact the Continence Advisory Service.

### **Your exercise programme: 3 times daily**

#### **Long squeezes**

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles and hold them for as long as you can, aim to hold up to a maximum of 10 seconds
- Relax fully for 4 seconds
- Now tighten again for the same time
- Relax fully for 4 seconds
- Repeat this until the muscles feel weaker

How many seconds can you hold for?

How many times could you repeat it?  times

Eventually aim for a 10 second hold repeated 10 times.

#### **Short squeezes**

- Quickly tighten up your pelvic floor muscles
- Relax fully
- Repeat this until the muscles feel weaker

How many times can you do this in a row?

Eventually aim for at least 10 times.

**To strengthen the muscles it is necessary to repeat the long and short squeezes 3 times daily. As your muscles get stronger gradually increase both the hold time in seconds and the number of repetitions. Try to build up to doing 10 long squeeze exercises and 10 short squeezes at least 3 times each day.**

## **Here are some tips to help you remember to do your exercises 3 times a day:**

- Either:**
1. Use the exercise diary on page 6 of this booklet
  2. Set mobile phone reminders or use the NHS Squeezy app for a smartphone
  3. Or use daily routine activities as a prompt e.g.:
    - Sitting on the toilet lid, after going to the toilet
    - During programme breaks on TV
    - If you are a new mum, sitting whilst feeding your baby

**To help prevent leakage of urine you should always tighten your pelvic floor muscles before and during coughing, sneezing, lifting or with any other activity which causes leakage. This is called functional bracing. This is also very important if you have symptoms of prolapse.**

It may take 3 to 6 months to notice a good improvement, but persevere, it will be worth it. Get help if there is no improvement in your bladder symptoms after 3 months. See page 6 for details on how to contact the Continence Advisory Service.

Once your pelvic floor muscles are strong, it is important to maintain them. Continue your exercises 2 to 3 times a day for the rest of your life. If you do not, then your muscles could become weak again.

### **Frequently asked questions:**

#### **Does my weight have anything to do with my problem?**

Getting down to your ideal weight will reduce the amount of strain placed on your pelvic floor muscles and can lead to a considerable improvement in your symptoms.

#### **Does drinking a lot of caffeine affect my symptoms?**

Caffeine can act as a stimulant to your bladder and is therefore best avoided or reduced. Caffeine is present in coffee, tea, chocolate, many fizzy drinks and some medication.

#### **I tend to be constipated on occasions and then my symptoms seem to be worse. Why?**

Straining to open the bowel stretches the pelvic floor muscles, which can weaken them. Check your diet to avoid this problem, or see your GP for advice. Ensuring adequate fluid intake can help (see below).

## **I sometimes leak or feel something coming down when picking up heavy objects. Is there anything I can do to stop this happening?**

Lifting puts a strain on the pelvic floor. If you cannot avoid lifting a heavy object, remember to bend your knees first and then tighten your pelvic floor muscles; hold them tight (brace) until you have lowered the load.

### **Are there any exercises I should avoid?**

Straight leg sit-ups and double leg lifts (lifting both legs up at the same time whilst keeping them straight) may put severe pressure on the pelvic floor (and the back) and should be avoided. Also avoid high impact activity, i.e. any activity involving both feet off the ground at the same time e.g. running, jumping.

### **Remember:**

**Fluid intake:** Aim to drink 1.5- 2 litres (3-4 pints) of fluids per day. Drinking an excessive amount may make symptoms of frequency and urgency worse, while not drinking enough will lead to strong, concentrated urine which may irritate your bladder and you may find yourself rushing to the toilet.

**Frequency of bladder emptying:** Try to avoid emptying your bladder too frequently as this can reduce its ability to hold urine. If you feel that you need to go more often than every 2 hours (frequency) then try to train your bladder to wait longer. When you feel the urge to empty your bladder soon after having done so, try these delaying techniques:

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles
- Sit on something hard, e.g. the arm of a chair
- Distract your mind (for example, keep busy, make a phone call)

However, it is important to empty your bladder regularly throughout the day (3 to 4 hourly) to avoid overstretching the bladder.

**Bladder emptying:** Do not crouch or hover over the toilet seat. It is important to sit down and completely empty your bladder, without straining, each time you go to the toilet. Urine left inside the bladder can irritate the bladder lining causing inflammation (which might aggravate symptoms).

It can help to:

- Rock forwards and backwards 3-4 times as you finish passing urine
- Or stand up, walk about for a few moments, then sit and try again.

## Your exercise diary

You might like to use the table below (for the first 12 weeks) to remind you to do your exercise 3 times a day. Tick the box each time you do your exercises.

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Week 1							
Week 2							
Week 3							
Week 4							
Week 5							
Week 6							
Week 7							
Week 8							
Week 9							
Week 10							
Week 11							
Week 12							

### **Aneurin Bevan University Health Board Continence Advisory Service**

Contact details: Telephone 01633 623824

### **Further information can be found on the pelvic health website found at**

<https://abuhb.nhs.wales/hospitals/a-z-hospital-services/physiotherapy/pelvic-health-physiotherapy/>

Search for "Pelvic Health Physiotherapy ABHB" in your internet browser

Scan the QR code for quick access via your Smartphone



**This document is available in Welsh / Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg**