

Pelvic Organ Prolapse

Pelvic Health Physiotherapy Information

Contents

- What is a pelvic organ prolapse?
- Anatomy of the pelvis & different types of pelvic organ prolapse
- Management of pelvic organ prolapse
- Pelvic floor exercises explained
- Other helpful advice, including:
 - Healthy bowel and bladder habits
 - Healthy fluid intake
 - Exercising safely and comfortably
 - Comfortable sexual intercourse
 - When and how to ask for help

What is a Pelvic Organ Prolapse?

- A pelvic organ prolapse occurs when a pelvic organ, such as the bladder, uterus (womb) or part of the bowel, moves down from its normal position and pushes against the walls of the vagina
- This can cause the feeling of 'something coming down' or a feeling of vaginal heaviness. There may be a bulge felt inside or outside the vagina
- A prolapse may also cause bladder, bowel or sexual symptoms

Some women will experience mild symptoms or no symptoms at all whilst others may find their quality of life is more seriously impacted

It is not known exactly how many women have a prolapse as not all women go to see their doctor, however it is very common. It can affect women of any age, though it is thought that approximately 50% of women aged 50 have some degree of prolapse. A prolapse is more common in women who have had children

It is possible to have more than one type of prolapse e.g. a bladder and a bowel prolapse

Pelvic Health Physiotherapy can help you manage your prolapse and decrease your symptoms



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Possible Symptoms of Pelvic Organ Prolapse

- A feeling of something coming down inside the vagina
- Lower back pain or lower abdominal pain
- A heaviness or dragging sensation in the vagina or pelvis
- A bulge at the vaginal entrance
- A feeling that the vagina is wider, looser or more open than normal
- Difficulty inserting a tampon, or tampons slipping out of place when inserted
- Discomfort during sexual intercourse
- A feeling that intercourse is difficult because something is in the way

Some women with a prolapse do not have any symptoms at all, or symptoms may vary from day to day

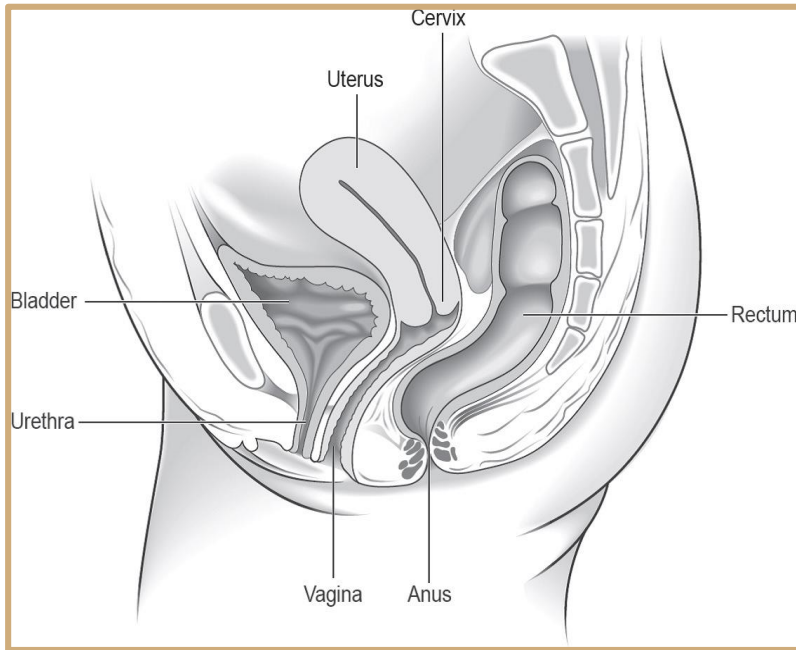
Symptoms may worsen with certain activities or towards the end of the day. See if you can identify what makes your symptoms feel worse



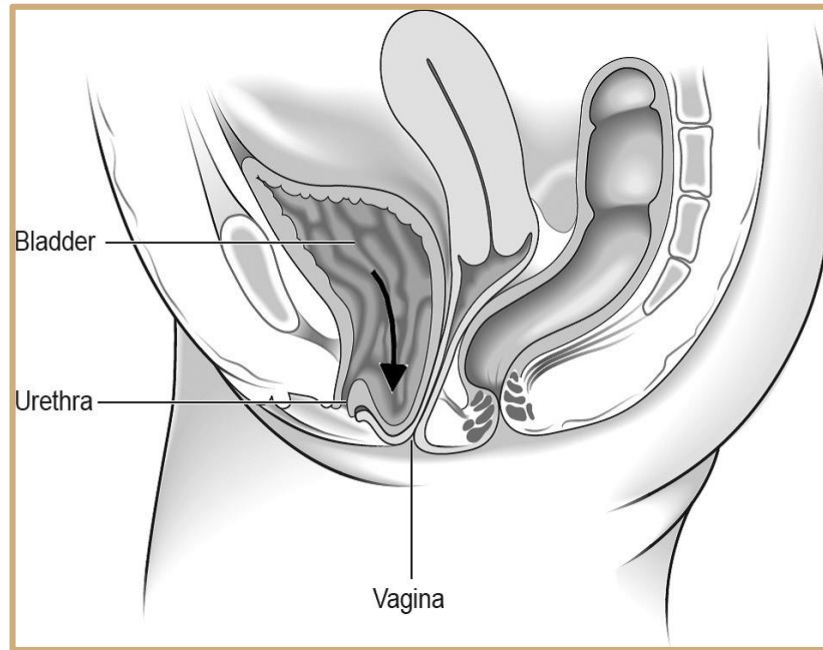
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Anterior/Front Vaginal Wall Prolapse (Bladder Prolapse)



**Normal Pelvic Anatomy:
Side View of the Pelvis**

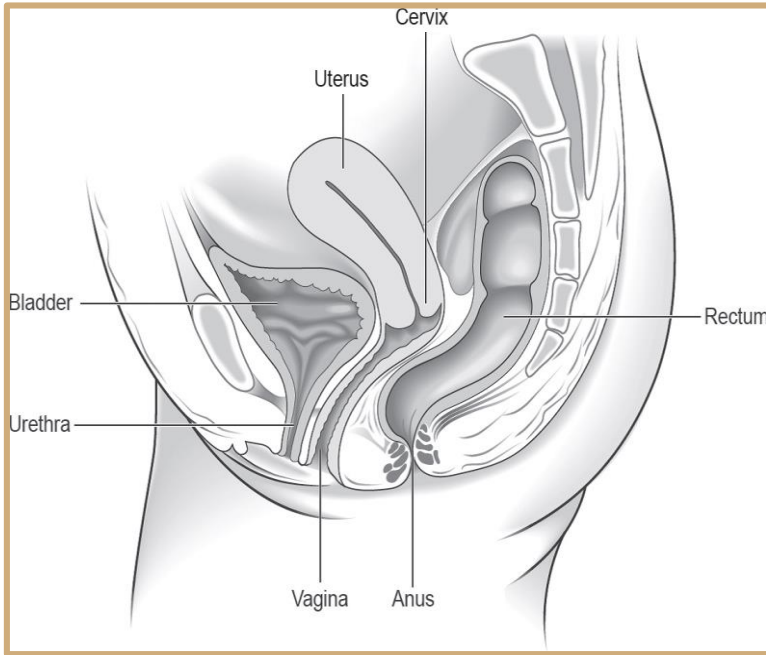


Anterior Vaginal Wall Prolapse

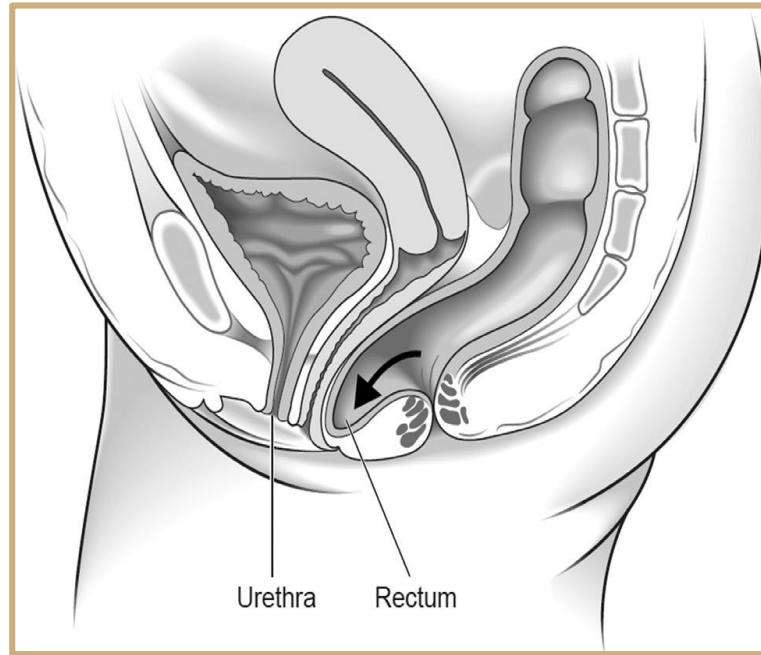
The vaginal wall that supports the bladder becomes lax and bulges down into the vaginal canal. This can lead to symptoms such as:

- Difficulty fully emptying the bladder
- A slow flow when emptying the bladder
- Leaking urine after emptying the bladder
- Sudden urges to empty your bladder
- Accidental bladder leakage

Posterior/Back Vaginal Wall Prolapse (Bowel Prolapse)



**Normal Pelvic Anatomy:
Side View of the Pelvis**

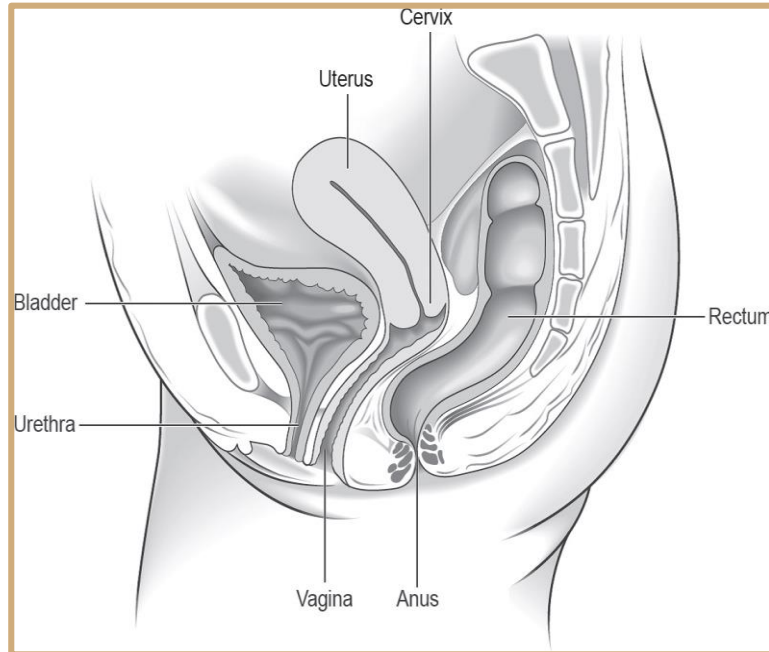


Posterior Vaginal Wall Prolapse

The vaginal wall supporting the rectum/back passage becomes lax and bulges down into the vaginal canal. This can cause symptoms such as:

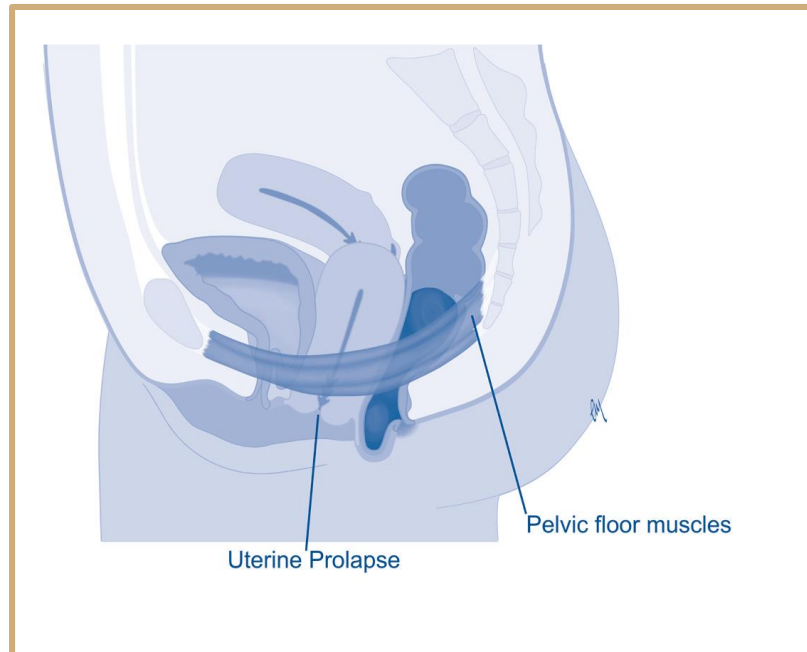
- Difficulty fully emptying your bowels
- Increased need to strain to empty your bowels
- Accidental bowel or wind leakage
- Sudden urgency to open your bowels
- The need to use your fingers to help you empty your bowels

Uterine Prolapse



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**Normal Pelvic Anatomy:
Side view of the Pelvis**



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Uterine Prolapse

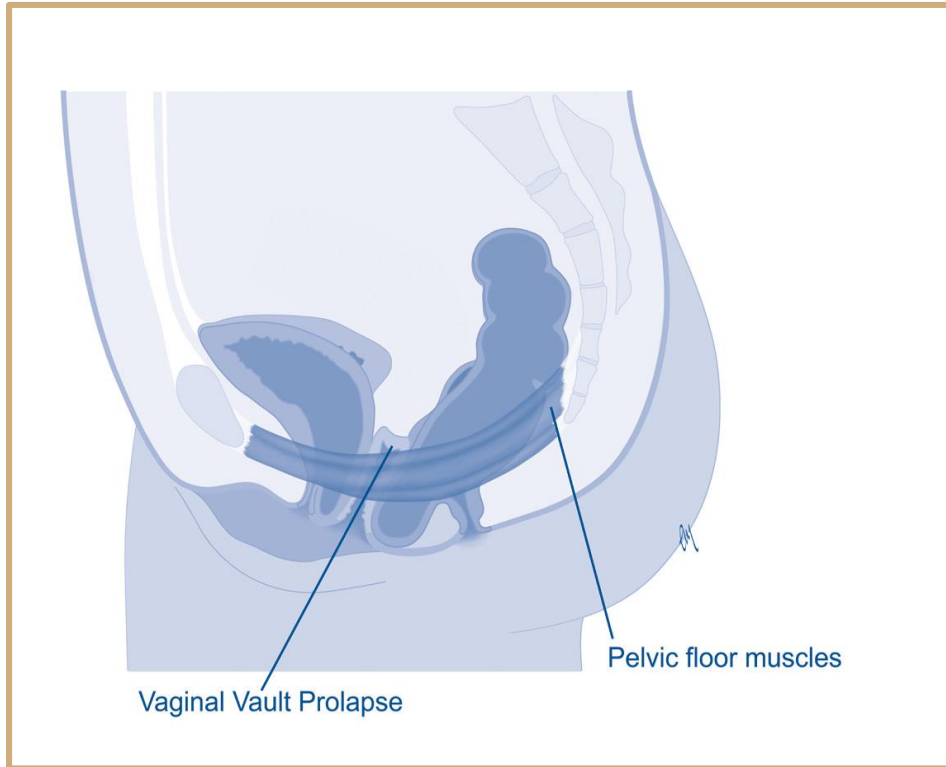
- The uterus moves down to sit lower within the vagina. Your cervix may sit nearer to the entrance to the vagina
- You may feel a fullness or bulge within the vaginal canal or at the entrance to the vagina
- You may also experience bladder and bowel symptoms too



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Vaginal Vault Prolapse



- This type of prolapse can occur following a hysterectomy (removal of the womb and sometimes other parts of the female reproductive system)
- The top of the vagina, 'the vault', where the womb previously sat, can bulge down into the vaginal canal
- You may feel a bulge or looseness in the vagina
- You may also experience bladder or bowel symptoms

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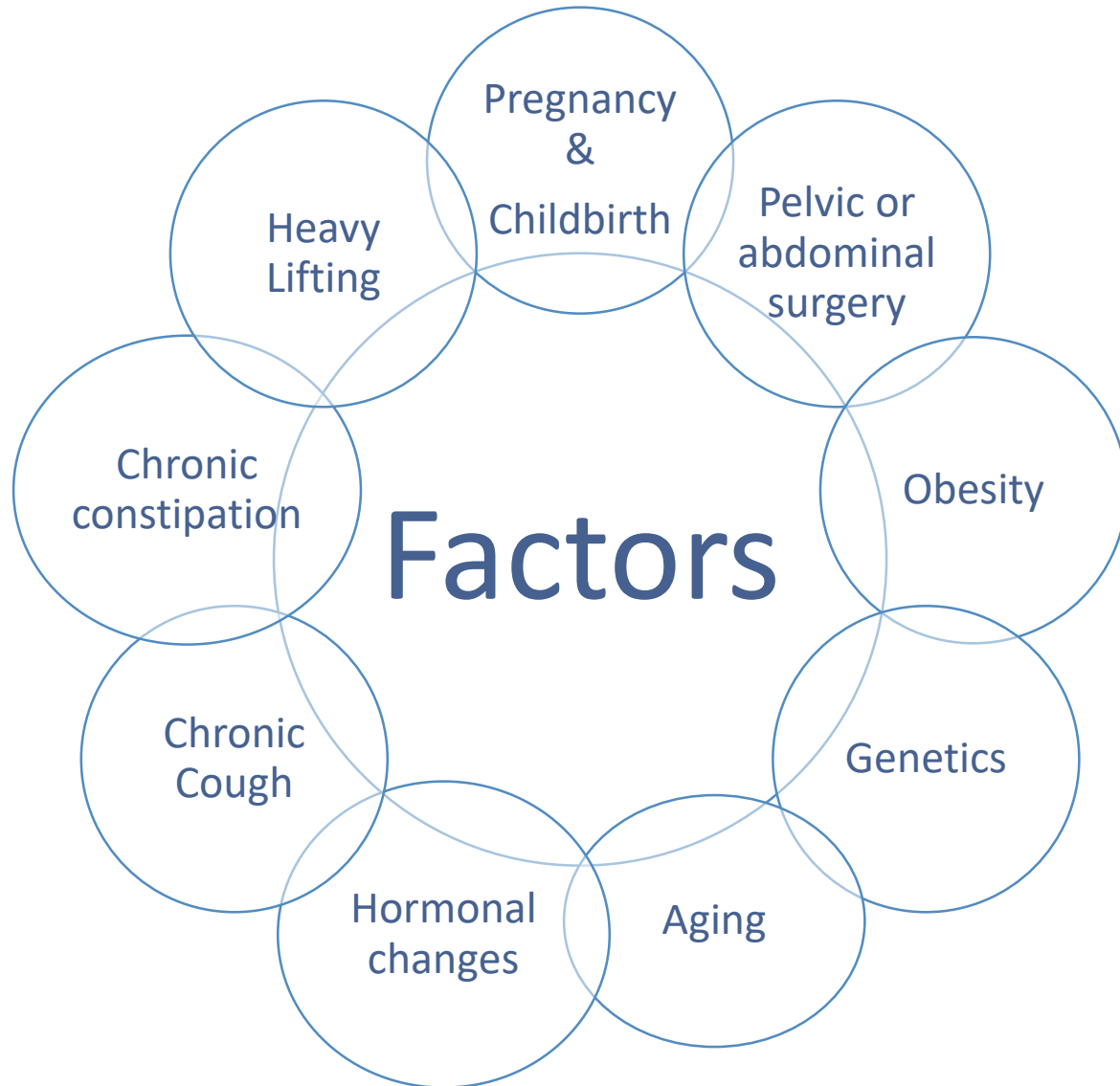
Side View of the Pelvis showing a Vaginal Vault Prolapse following a Hysterectomy



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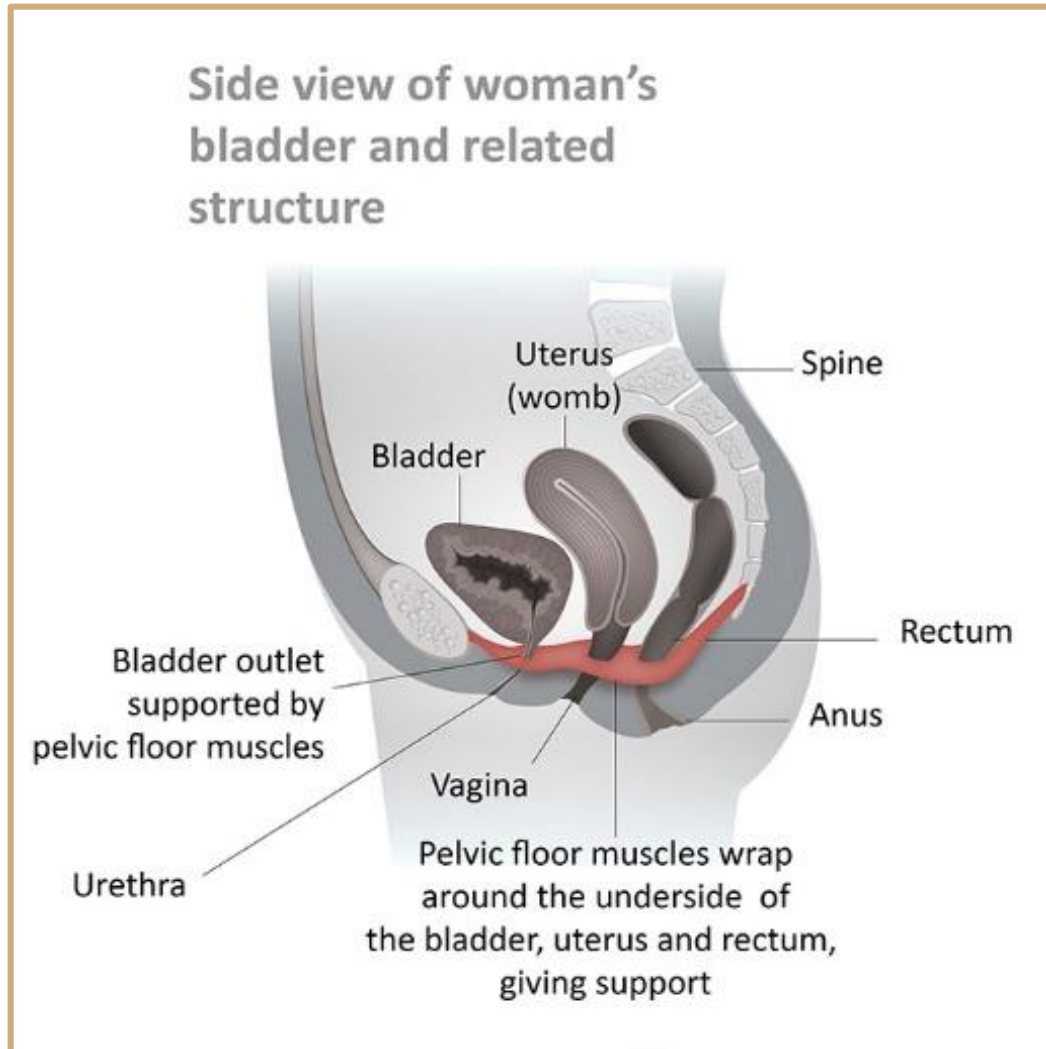
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What Causes a Pelvic Organ Prolapse?



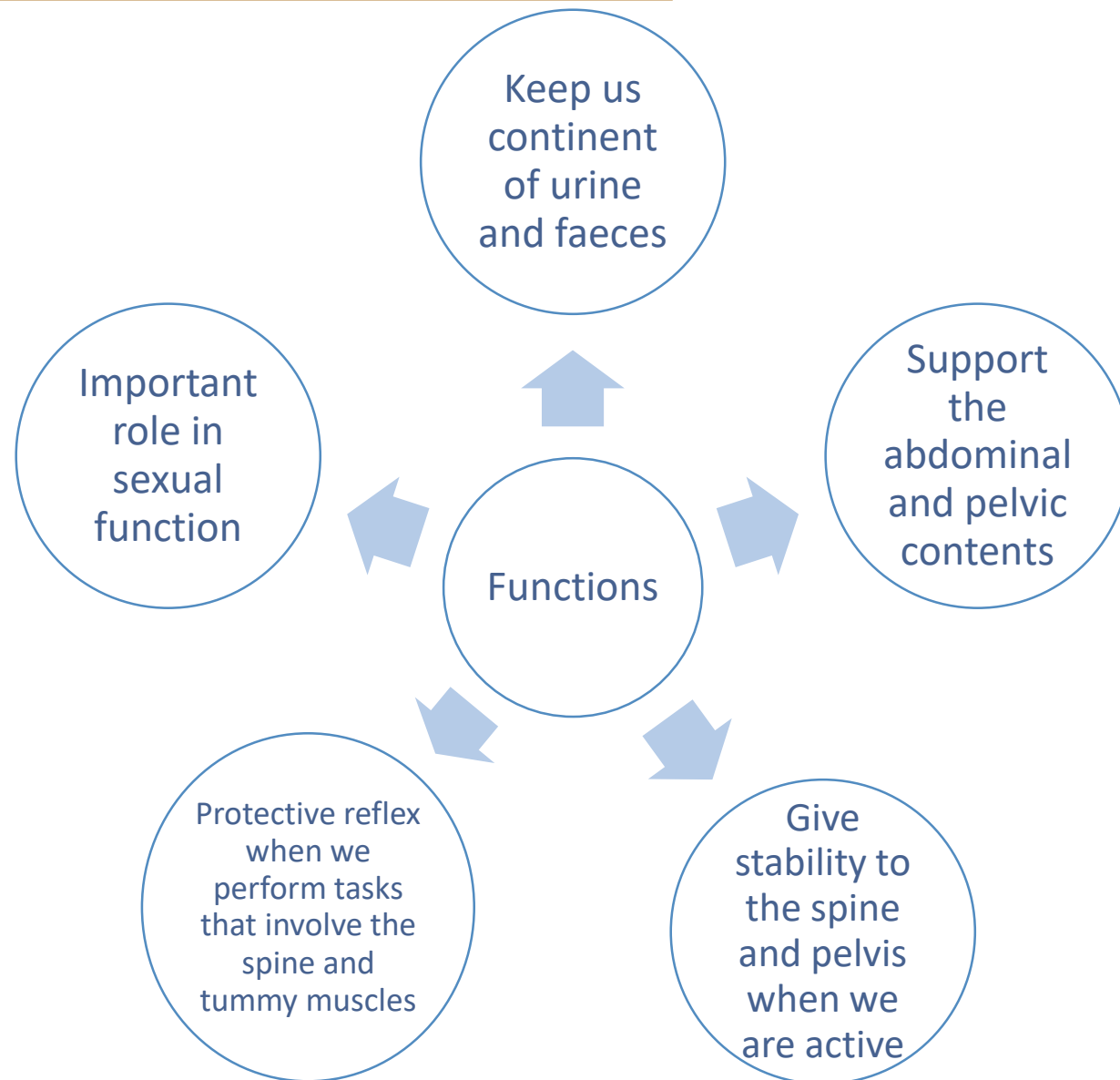
- Weakness in the pelvic floor muscles and ligaments can lead to pelvic organ prolapse
- This can be caused by a combination of factors
- Some factors are not changeable, such as aging...
- But many can be changed, such as strengthening weak pelvic floor muscles

What are the Pelvic Floor Muscles?



- The pelvic floor muscles are a group of muscles that span the underside of your pelvis, forming the 'floor' of your pelvis
- They insert into the pubic bone at the front, they fan out to the side into your sitting bones and into your tailbone/coccyx at the back
- Your bladder, reproductive organs and bowels are all supported inside the pelvis by your pelvic floor muscles and other supporting ligaments and connective tissues

What do the Pelvic Floor Muscles do?



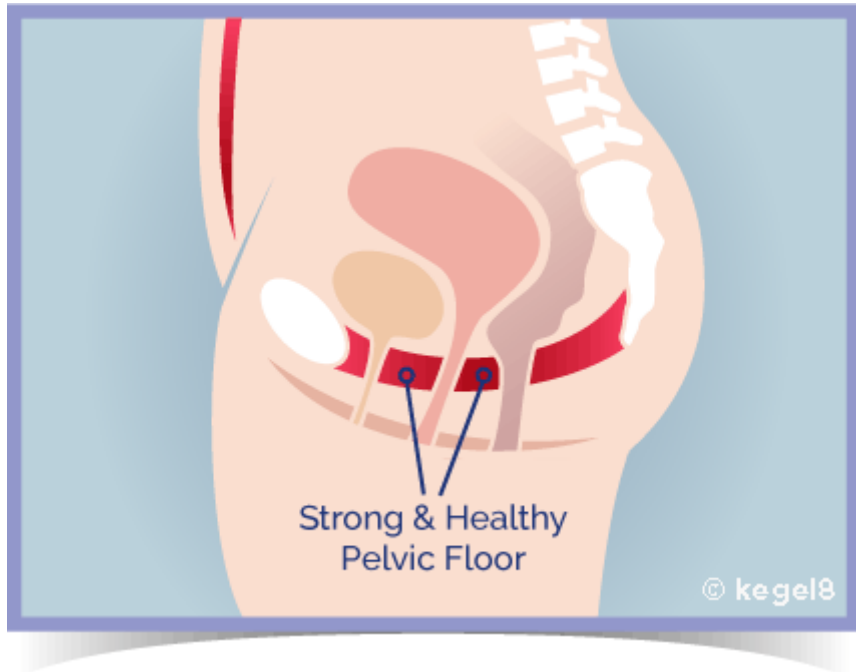
Pelvic health physiotherapy aims to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles in order to provide a firm support for the pelvic organs which can help avoid worsening pelvic organ prolapse symptoms



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Why do Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises?



- To reduce prolapse symptoms
- To cure or improve bladder leakage
- To improve bowel control
- To improve sexual function
- To help ease back pain

Data collected in Aneurin Bevan University Health Board showed that 74% of patients who attended physiotherapy for prolapse symptoms were either 'very much' or 'much improved' following physiotherapy input



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How to Find & Squeeze your Pelvic Floor Muscles

- ☐ Lie down or sit upright, in a comfortable position. (If your prolapse feels more comfortable, you can try this lying down with a pillow beneath your hips)
- ☐ Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles by imagining that you are stopping yourself passing wind and stopping the flow of urine
- ☐ It should feel like a drawing up of the pelvic floor muscles from the back passage towards the bladder



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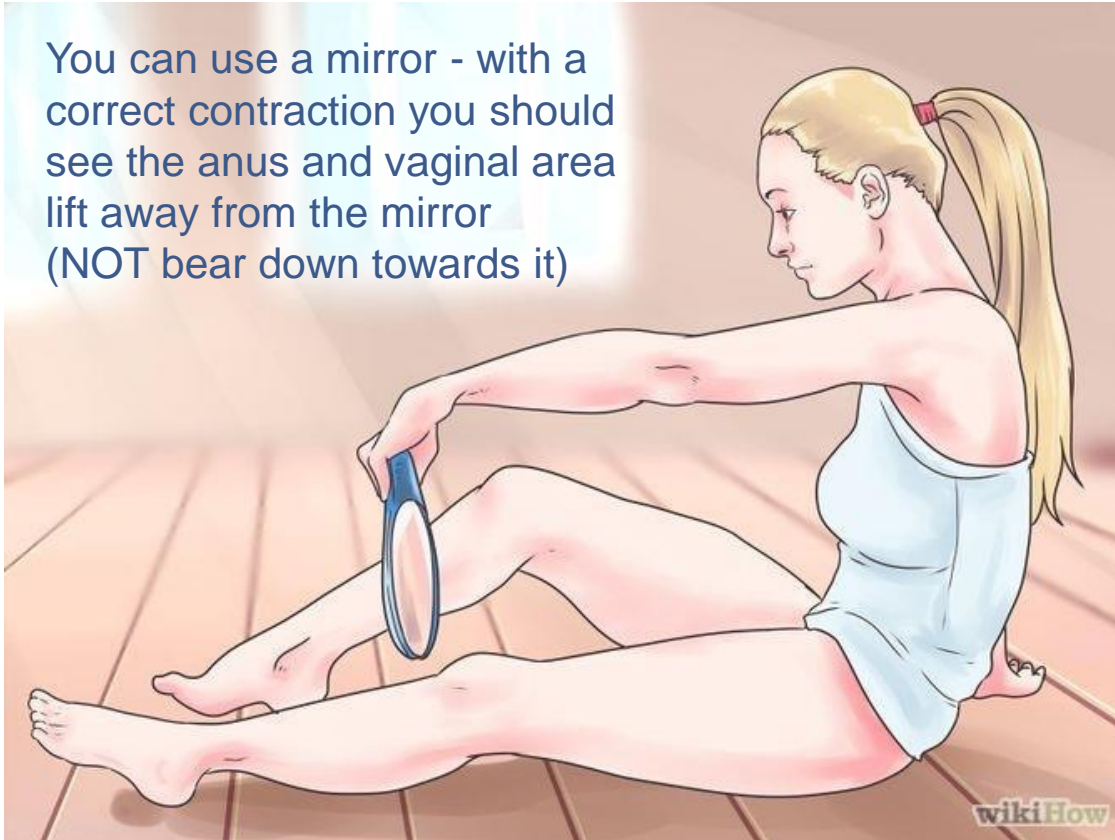
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How to Find & Squeeze your Pelvic Floor Muscles

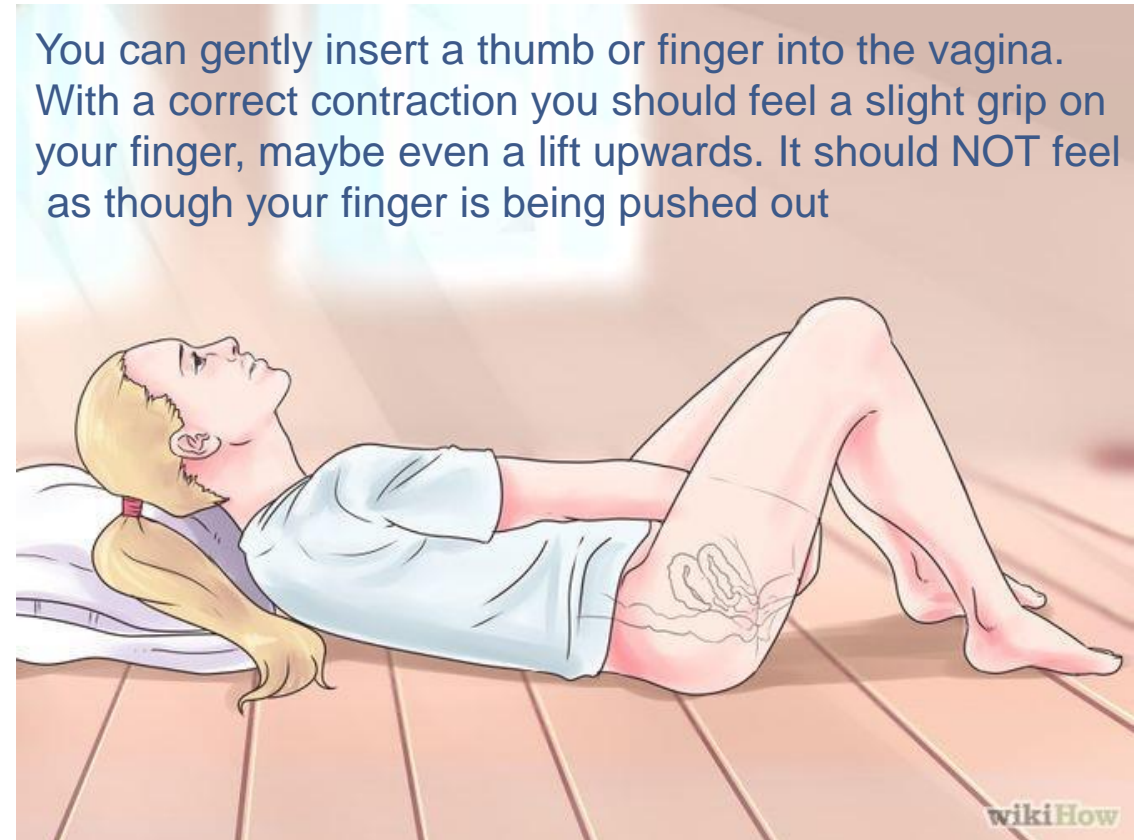
- ✔ Start as you breathe out and keeping breathing gently
- ✔ You may feel your lower tummy muscles 'joining in' a little
- ✔ Relax your muscles fully after every contraction
- ✘ Hold your breath
- ✘ Squeeze your buttock or leg muscles

How to find your Pelvic Floor Muscles

You can use a mirror - with a correct contraction you should see the anus and vaginal area lift away from the mirror (NOT bear down towards it)



You can gently insert a thumb or finger into the vagina. With a correct contraction you should feel a slight grip on your finger, maybe even a lift upwards. It should NOT feel as though your finger is being pushed out



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How to do Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

☐ Long Squeezes

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles, hold the squeeze, then release them fully. How long can you hold for?

Repeat the long squeezes until the pelvic floor muscles tire. How many times can you repeat it?

☐ Short Squeezes

Quickly tighten your pelvic floor muscles, then immediately release them fully. How many times can you do this before the muscles tire?

Exercise Tips

- ☐ Always relax the muscles fully after each squeeze
- ☐ Aim eventually to do **10 long squeezes**, holding each squeeze for **10 seconds**, followed by **10 short squeezes**
- ☐ Aim to do your pelvic floor muscle exercises at least **3 times each day**. You may find it easier sitting or lying down to start with
- ☐ If you find that you can only hold the squeeze for a short time, or can only do a few before the muscles tire, it may be better to start doing them '**little and often**'

Exercise Tips

- ☐ You should notice an improvement within **3 - 5 months**
- ☐ As your muscles start to feel stronger, try doing the exercises **standing up**
- ☐ Keep practising your pelvic floor muscle exercises **once each day** to maintain the improvement
- ☐ If you experience pain during or after doing the exercises, or if you don't see any improvement after 5 months, it is important to get advice from a pelvic health physiotherapist

There are many devices advertised on-line and in magazines for strengthening the pelvic floor muscles. They may not be advisable for you to use, so we recommend that you discuss this with a pelvic health physiotherapist before buying one



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Squeeze Your Pelvic Floor Muscles...

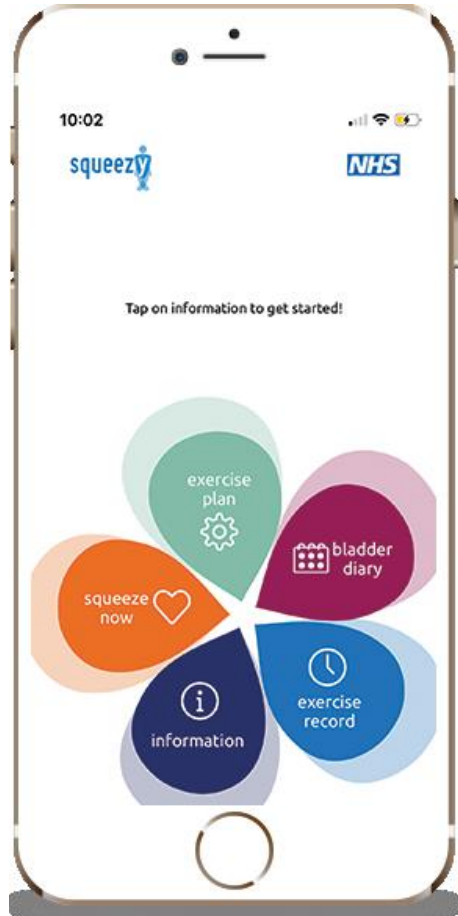
- ☐ **When you cough, sneeze, laugh and lift heavy objects**
This helps to support your pelvic organs, avoids worsening prolapse symptoms and prevents bladder leakage
- ☐ **When you lift heavy objects**
Gently squeeze your pelvic floor muscles and your lower tummy muscles. This helps to support your spine, pelvic organs and any prolapse, and helps to prevent bladder leakage. If you have a prolapse, try and avoid heavy lifting. It is better to lift a few more lighter loads than one heavy load
- ☐ **When you exercise**
Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles with the hardest part of the exercise - for example, practise squeezing your muscles and breathing out as you rise from a squat



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How to Remember to do Pelvic Floor Exercises



©squeezezyapp.com

- ☐ Make the exercises part of your daily routine, doing them at the same time as another activity you already do regularly e.g. after eating meals, or whilst brushing your teeth
- ☐ Set reminders on your phone
- ☐ Try one of the pelvic floor exercise apps available
- ☐ Do the exercises after emptying your bladder, sitting on the toilet lid (but don't practise by stopping your flow of urine)



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Use Your Abdominal Muscles



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- ☐ Your abdominal muscles work with your pelvic floor muscles to help to support your spine
- ☐ When you lift something heavy, draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles
- ☐ It's also a good idea to keep the object you're lifting close to you, and to use your leg muscles



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Pelvic Floor Exercises | For More Information

- This animation shows the location of your pelvic floor muscles - [Pelvic Floor Anatomy](#) *(opens in new window)*
- The following is a video of one of our physiotherapists explaining how to do pelvic floor exercises during pregnancy, (the same principles apply if you are not pregnant)- [Pelvic Floor Exercises](#) *(opens in new window)*
- This is a leaflet version - [Pelvic Floor Exercises For Women](#) *(opens in new window)*

Pelvic Organ Prolapse | What else can help?



- ☐ Maintain a healthy weight and/or try and lose weight if your BMI is high
- ☐ Reduce activities that may strain the pelvic floor, such as heavy lifting and high impact exercise
- ☐ Avoid constipation and straining
- ☐ Adopt healthy bladder habits
- ☐ Avoid standing unnecessarily for long periods
- ☐ Stop smoking



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What is Healthy Bowel Function?



- A normal bowel empties anything between **3 times per day** and **3 times per week**
- A poo should be **easily passed**
 - ✓ without straining
 - ✓ without pain
 - ✓ without blood



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Tips for Healthy Bowels



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- ☐ Eat enough fibre (aim for 30g per day – gradually increase the fibre in your diet)
- ☐ Drink plenty of fluids to keep your stool soft (1.5 to 2 litres per day)
- ☐ Adapting your sitting position on the toilet (for example, by raising your knees) can help to avoid straining,

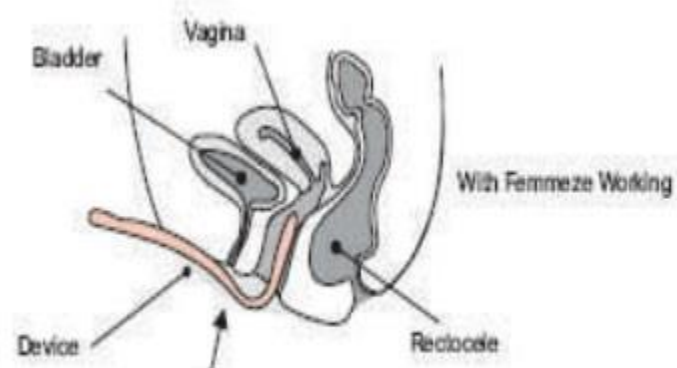
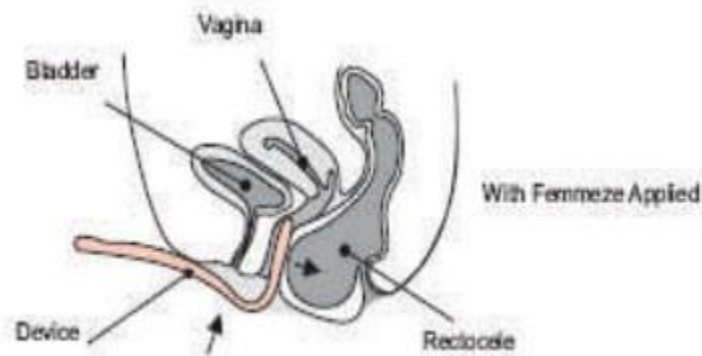


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Emptying your Bowels if you have a Posterior Wall Vaginal Prolapse

If you have a posterior vaginal wall prolapse and are struggling to empty your bowels many women find it useful to support the perineum (the area between the vagina and back passage) with some folded tissue paper or to use a thumb or finger in the vagina to help pass a stool more easily. There is also a device which has been specially designed to help women reposition their prolapse. You can ask your physiotherapist about this aid



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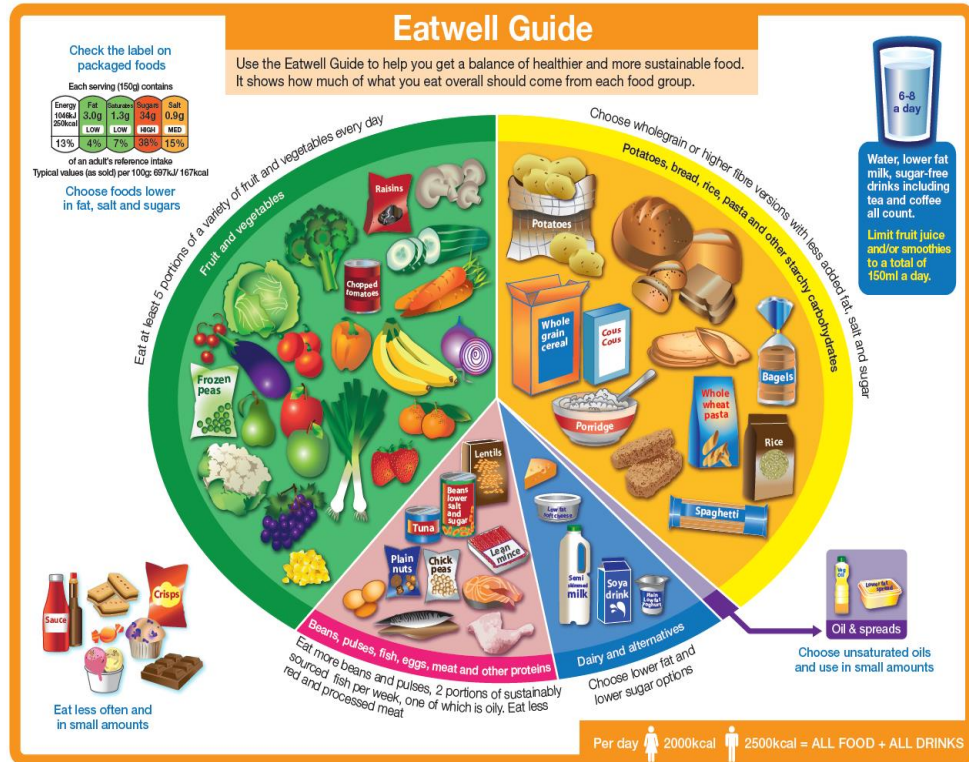
Healthy Bowels | For More Information

- [Tips to Encourage Healthy Bowel Habits](#) *(opens in new window)*
- [Optimal Position for Emptying Your Bowel](#) *(opens in new window)*
- [Fibre Intake](#) *(opens in new window)*

Healthy Weight

- Gaining or maintaining a healthy weight for your height can help with prolapse symptoms
- Your Body Mass Index (BMI) is a measure that uses your height and weight to work out if your weight is healthy
- You can check your BMI here: [BMI Healthy Weight Calculator](#) *(opens in new window)*

Healthy Weight



- There are lots of resources available that can help with healthy eating and weight loss, including:
- [The Eatwell Guide](#) (*opens in new window*)
- [The NHS Weight Loss Plan](#) (*opens in new window*)

Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh Government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland

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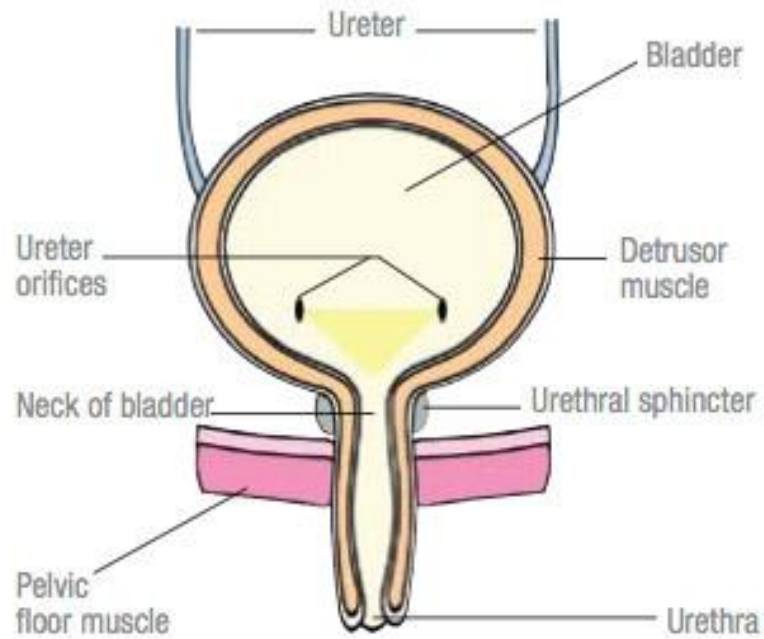
Stop Smoking



- Smoking causes a chronic cough that causes pressure on the pelvic floor muscles which can worsen prolapse symptoms
- Research shows you are **4 times more likely to stop** with the help of dedicated NHS stop smoking services
- For information about local support see: www.helpmequit.wales (opens in new window) or phone 0808 2786119

Stopping Smoking is the most important thing that you can do for your health

What Does the Bladder Do?



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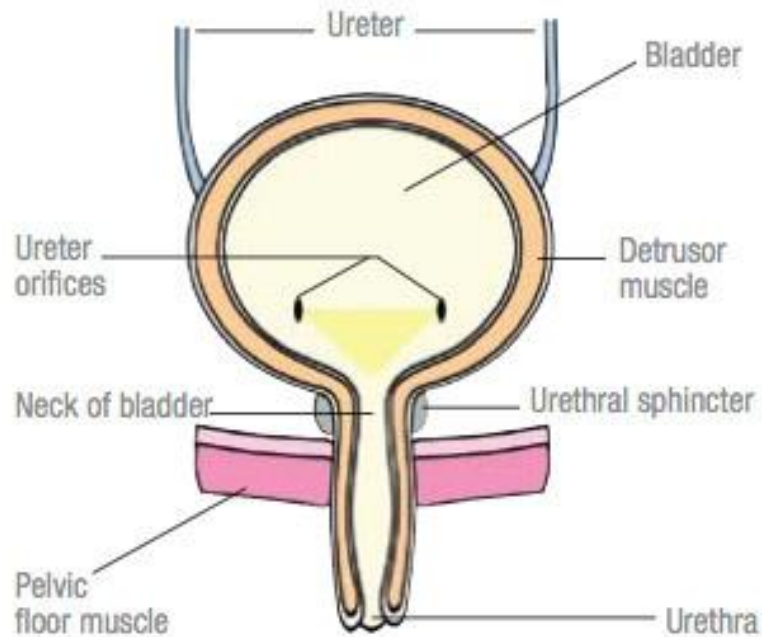
- The kidneys filter blood to remove excess water and waste, and produce urine, which travels from the kidneys to the bladder
- The bladder stores the urine and then empties it out
- Healthy bladder habits can help your pelvic floor muscles to stop you leaking and stay strong



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What is a Healthy Bladder?



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- Holds between **400 to 600mls** of urine
- Needs emptying up to around **8 times** per day
- And **not more than once** during the night
- Gives **plenty of warning** when it is getting full
- **Is free of infections**
- **Empties fully** without pain or blood in the urine. Note, if you have an anterior wall/bladder prolapse, you may find rocking backwards and forwards on the toilet as you finish, helps you empty your bladder fully



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Tips for a Healthy Bladder



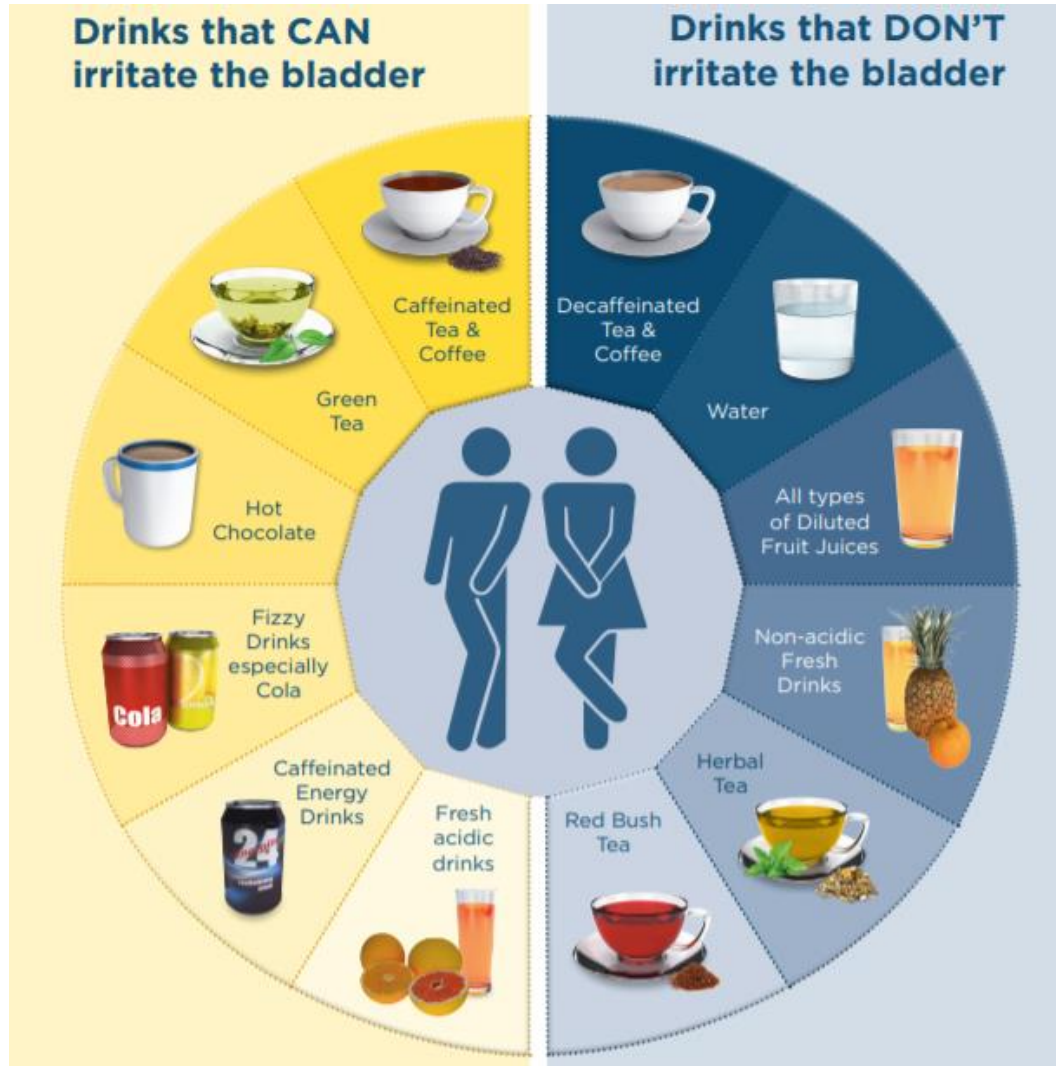
- ☐ **Drink enough fluids**
but avoid drinking too much
- ☐ **Avoid drinks that may irritate the bladder**
if you get little warning to pass urine
- ☐ **Strengthen your pelvic floor muscles**
This also helps with bladder control



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Drinking for a Healthy Bladder



If you find that you have to rush to the toilet to pass urine

- Drink about 1.5 – 2 litres (6 – 8 mugs) of fluid a day
- Cut out drinks that can irritate the bladder for a few weeks to see if it makes a difference
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol
- **Gradually** swap over from caffeinated to decaffeinated drinks to avoid a caffeine withdrawal headache

Exercise



Keeping or becoming more active has great health benefits

It has been shown to help:

- Improve sleep
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Manage stress
- Improve quality of life

Discuss starting an exercise regime with your physiotherapist or GP if you have any health concerns



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Physical Activity For Adults & Older Adults



The chart on the left shows the exercise recommendations for adults and older adults

(UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines 2019)

Physical Activity & Prolapse: Exercise tips

- If exercise makes your prolapse symptoms worse or you experience urinary leakage, try to find types of activity that don't cause or increase your symptoms
- Reduce any high impact exercise initially if you have a prolapse, for example, swap running for brisk walking
- If your prolapse is comfortable, you may gradually build up the impact as your symptoms improve and your pelvic floor muscles strengthen with the exercises
- There are specific garments designed to support a prolapse which may help
(Speak to a pelvic health physiotherapist for information about them)
- There are vaginal devices that you may use to reduce bladder leakage during exercise
(Speak to a pelvic health physiotherapist for information about them)

Comfortable Intercourse

Menopause

- Some women will experience vaginal dryness as a symptom of the menopause. This occurs due to a natural decline in the levels of oestrogen present in the body. The skin in the vulva and vagina can become thinner, with decreased elasticity, and the area may feel quite irritated and sore
- Vaginal dryness can decrease the enjoyment of sexual intercourse and so a natural, unscented lubricant is recommended
- To minimise dryness and irritation avoid washing the area with perfumed products and try using a vaginal moisturiser

Pelvic Organ Prolapse

- Some women experience a feeling of dryness and discomfort in their vagina if they have a prolapse and this can also effect their ability to enjoy sex
- Try using plenty of lubrication during sex to ease any discomfort that you may experience
- You may find different positions more comfortable
- You can also try using a vaginal moisturiser throughout the day to reduce symptoms of dryness and discomfort
- Try a natural, unscented lubricant (You can ask a pelvic health physiotherapist for information about them)

If symptoms persist, speak to your GP as there may be some alternative treatment options



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Comfortable Intercourse | For More Information

- [Why Does Sex Hurt?](#) *(opens in new window)*
- [Care of Vulval Skin](#) *(opens in new window)*

If symptoms persist, speak to your GP as there may be alternative treatment options

Are You Concerned? When & How to Ask for Help

- Pelvic Health Physiotherapy can help in the management of pelvic organ prolapse, painful intercourse, urinary and faecal urgency and incontinence, and pelvic pain



- If you have any symptoms that are bothersome, speak to your doctor, nurse or another healthcare professional and request a physiotherapy referral
- You will then be contacted and an appointment will be arranged for you to see a pelvic health physiotherapist for a 1 to 1 assessment and treatment plan



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Key Points to Remember

- Pelvic organ prolapse is common in women that have had children
- Regular pelvic floor exercises can help reduce symptoms and improve your quality of life
- The exercises need to be done -
 - The right way (the correct technique)
 - Often enough (3 times a day)
 - For long enough (at least 3 months)
- Healthy lifestyle changes can also help
- If you need further advice or treatment ask to be referred to a pelvic health physiotherapist

Test Yourself...

- Q: How do pelvic floor exercises help to manage or reduce pelvic organ prolapse symptoms?
- A: Stronger pelvic floor muscles will support your pelvic organs and prolapse better & reduce the strain on your prolapse

- Q: How often do you have to do pelvic floor exercises?
- A: It is recommended that you do pelvic floor exercises 3 x daily for at least three months to notice any benefits. Once your symptoms have improved to a level you are happy with, you can reduce the exercises to once a day

- Q: What can you do to avoid making your prolapse symptoms feel worse?
- A: Do your pelvic floor exercises regularly, squeeze your pelvic floor muscles when you lift, cough or sneeze, maintain a healthy weight, eat plenty of fibre and drink 2 litres of fluids daily to avoid constipation

- Q: Which activities can aggravate your prolapse symptoms?
- A: Heavy lifting (particularly if not using the correct technique), straining to empty your bowels, high impact exercise (particularly if you do not have strong pelvic floor muscles), coughing