

Pelvic floor muscle exercises



The importance of exercise

When muscles are not used they become weak, reducing a person's ability to perform normal tasks such as carrying, lifting, and climbing stairs. Regular exercise is the most important way of keeping muscles strong.

It is particularly important that strength is maintained in a group of muscles known as the pelvic floor. These muscles stretch between the pubic bone at the front of the pelvis, and the sacrum (tail bone) at the back. They form a hammock-like support for the organs of the pelvis: the bladder; lower bowel; and, in women, the uterus. The passages leading from these organs, the urethra; anus; and, in women, the vagina, all pass through this muscular support.

Your pelvic floor muscles are involved in bladder and bowel control, and also help sexual function in men and women.

Causes of weakening

Often the pelvic floor muscles are weakened. This can happen because of chronic constipation causing straining, being overweight, ageing, chronic cough or a general lack of exercise. In women, pregnancy, childbirth and reduced hormone levels after menopause can also contribute to weakened pelvic floor muscles.

While pelvic floor problems are more common in women, they are not uncommon in men and can lead to similar problems.

Consequences of a weak pelvic floor

Most of the time the pelvic floor muscles work automatically, keeping the bladder and bowel closed. But they can also be deliberately tensed and relaxed, for example when suppressing the urge to pass urine, or controlling the need to have a bowel action.

The consequences of weak muscles in this area are often very embarrassing. There may be leakage of urine (and sometimes faeces) during exertion such as jogging, coughing and sneezing; passing wind from the bowel; and, in women, prolapse (sinking) of the uterus causing a heavy feeling in the vagina.

Simple yet effective

As with muscles in the arms and legs, regular exercise of the pelvic floor muscles will maintain their strength. The following pelvic floor exercises, also known as Kegel exercises, are easy to do and can be done without anyone knowing — while driving a car, watching TV, sitting at your desk, or standing in a shopping queue.

- ▶ Imagine you want to stop yourself passing wind, or that you need to suppress an attack of diarrhoea. Breathe out as you tense the muscles, hold it for 5 to 10 seconds (you should be feeling an 'upward' movement) and then relax for 5 to 10 seconds. Repeat the sequence as many times as you can, up to 10.

This needs to be done several times a day. The full benefits may not be obvious for several months, so be persistent. This should become a life-long habit.

If you are having difficulty performing the pelvic floor exercises, your doctor may recommend seeing a physiotherapist to help you learn to exercise the correct muscles.

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