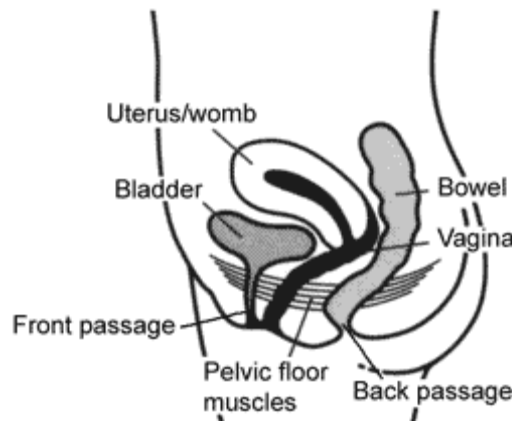


The pelvic floor muscles (women)

Bladder and Bowel Care Service

Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please contact the PALS desk on 01392 402093 or at rduh.pals-eastern@nhs.net (for Mid Devon, East Devon and Exeter services) or on 01271 314090 or at rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net (for North Devon services).



What and where are they?

The pelvic floor muscles are at the bottom of your pelvis rather like a hammock. They attach to the pubic bone at the front, to the coccyx (tail bone) at the back and to the inside walls of the pelvis.

What does the pelvic floor do?

The muscles of the pelvic floor support the pelvic organs (bladder, womb and bowel) especially when there is an increase of pressure in the abdomen, for example, during lifting, carrying, bending and straining. The pelvic floor muscles also help close the outlets from the bladder and bowel, preventing unwanted leakage (incontinence). The muscles relax to allow easy bladder and bowel emptying.

Strong pelvic floor muscles can also help increase sexual enjoyment.

Why do I need to exercise my pelvic floor?

All muscles need to be exercised to stay strong. The pelvic floor muscles can be weakened for a variety of reasons. For example:

- Pregnancy and childbirth, especially after an assisted vaginal birth, an episiotomy or tear, or a very large baby. Engaging with pelvic floor exercises during pregnancy and postnatally helps to reduce risk of future problems.
- Long-term constipation – regularly having to strain to empty your bowels.
- Prolonged heavy lifting.
- High impact exercise or use of heavy weights can overload pelvic floor muscles, especially if this type of exercise is started very suddenly.
- Being overweight – may increase the pressure on the pelvic floor muscles.
- Chronic cough caused by smoking or respiratory conditions.
- Menopause and ageing can reduce muscle strength.
- Other conditions which affect the nerve supply to the muscles, such as multiple sclerosis, stroke and diabetes.

Strengthening the pelvic floor can improve bladder and bowel control, and also support the pelvic organs, helping to prevent prolapse.

How do I find my pelvic floor?

Lie down or sit comfortably on a firm chair and try to keep breathing normally. Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind and urine by pulling up from the back passage towards the bladder. You may feel a 'lift' and tightening as the muscles contract. Your lower tummy muscles may also tighten, but try to avoid clenching your buttock muscles. Let your muscles relax completely after each contraction.

Exercises

To strengthen the muscles – long squeezes

Hold at the top of the 'lift' for up to 10 seconds. Release and rest for 5 seconds. Try to breathe normally. You may feel your tummy muscles tighten, which is fine.

Repeat as many times as you can up to 10 times.

To make the muscles work quickly when you need them – short squeezes

Pull the muscles in quickly and let go again. Repeat up to 10 times.

This is your set of exercises, which you should practice 3 times a day. The aim is to be able to do 10 long squeezes and 10 short squeezes – but this may take time and you may need to build up gradually.

Remember:

Set aside times to do the exercises when you are not busy with something else. If you are washing up or driving, you can't concentrate properly.

A full set must be done each time, to work well.

When you can do the exercises well in lying or sitting, progress to doing them in standing or whilst walking. For example, try to contract the pelvic floor muscles each time that you walk from your front door to the car.

Tips to help:

- Make the exercises part of your daily routine – for example, when brushing your teeth, waiting for the kettle to boil or as part of a regular gym routine.
- Put a reminder on your phone or try one of the pelvic floor exerciser apps. Keeping a written record is helpful to some people.
- After emptying your bladder (but don't try to stop the flow of urine).
- During a regular journey such as commuting to work.

Using the muscles

Practise the 'knack' – tighten your pelvic floor muscles before activities which cause increased pressure in your abdomen, e.g. coughing, sneezing, bending, carrying or lifting – it is important to get into a habit of pulling in your pelvic floor muscles immediately before and try to hold them until you stop.

Other things which may help

- Lose weight if you need to (check with your GP for advice).
- Try to stop smoking.
- Avoid constipation.
- Toileting positions – using a foot stool creates a squatting posture which may help to empty the bowel.
- Avoid heavy lifting where possible.
- Vaginal hormonal treatment may help if you have menopausal changes.
- Increasing your general fitness is important, for example, cycling, walking and swimming.

If you experience leakage of urine during exercise, it is advisable to avoid high impact exercises, such as trampolining. Sit ups and double-leg lifts can increase abdominal pressure and may need to be avoided.

Final thought

It takes 3 to 6 months to strengthen pelvic floor muscles with regular training, don't be disheartened if improvement is slow, and don't give up!

Just like any other muscles in the body, the pelvic floor muscles will go weak again if not exercised regularly. Therefore, these exercises must become as much a part of your daily routine as brushing your teeth!

Further information

- POGP (Physiotherapy in Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Pelvic floor) website: pogp.csp.org.uk/publications/pelvic-floor-muscle-exercises-women
- Bristol Health Partners Bladder and Bowel Confidence (BABCON) Pelvic floor training video www.bristolhealthpartners.org.uk/news/new-pelvic-floor-training-video
- Squeezy app: <https://squeezyapp.com/>

PALS

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PALS Mid Devon, East Devon and Exeter

- call 01392 402093 or email rduh.pals-eastern@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital in Wonford, Exeter.

PALS North Devon

- call 01271 314090 or email rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at the North Devon District Hospital in Barnstaple.

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