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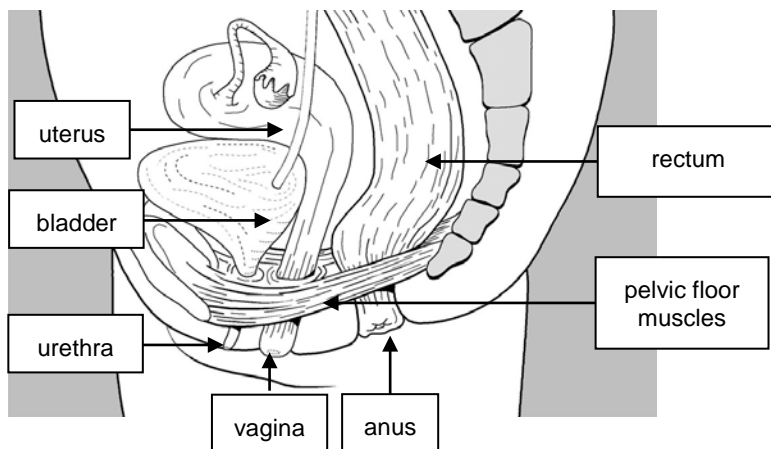
# ***Exercises for the pelvic floor muscles***

***Information for  
patients and carers***



## ***The pelvic floor***

This leaflet tells you how to exercise and strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. These muscles span the bottom of your pelvis and help to keep your insides in. They form a broad sling running from front to back, and as their name suggests, form the floor of the pelvis.



The pelvic floor muscles:

- support the bladder, uterus (womb) and rectum (back passage). These are also called the “pelvic organs”.
- control the outlets from the pelvic organs

These outlets are:

- urethra – the tube through which you empty your bladder
- vagina – leads to the uterus (womb)
- anus – leads to the rectum (back passage).

The strength of these muscles must be maintained to prevent problems occurring or to increase their strength when problems occur. The pelvic floor muscles may be damaged and become weak as a result of:

- childbirth
- constipation
- chronic cough
- being overweight
- menopausal changes
- persistent heavy lifting
- pelvic surgery
- long periods of inactivity due to illness.

### ***Symptoms of pelvic floor weakness***

Symptoms of pelvic floor weakness can be many and varied. The symptoms include:

- **Urgency**  
When you feel you can't hold on, have a desperate need to go to the toilet and are worried about being wet.
- **Urge incontinence**  
When you have urgency and are wet before you reach the toilet.
- **Frequency**  
When you need to empty your bladder more than 6 to 8 times a day (having had 6 to 8 drinks).

- **Stress incontinence**

When you leak during activities such as coughing, sneezing, laughing or during sporting activities.

- **Decreased satisfaction with sex**

If your muscles are weak you may be less likely to reach orgasm and have sexual satisfaction during intercourse.

**Pelvic floor muscles need to be exercised just as much as any other weak or damaged muscle. Following an exercise programme that is specially designed for you will help to maintain or improve their strength.**

### ***The basic exercise***

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop yourself from passing urine. The feeling is one of “**squeeze and lift**” closing and drawing up the back and front passages.

This is called a **pelvic floor contraction**.

It is important that you do this without pulling in your tummy strongly, squeezing your legs together, tightening your buttocks or holding your breath.

If you have difficulty locating your pelvic floor muscles here are a few things you could try:

1. While sitting, imagine trying to stop yourself from passing wind. To control the wind, tighten the muscles surrounding your back passage. You should be able to feel the muscles move – your buttocks and thighs should not move at all. You should feel your back passage being pulled upwards away from the seat.
2. While sitting or lying, put your hand on your perineum (this is your crotch area) and tighten your pelvic floor muscles. Can you feel movement away from your hand?
3. While sitting or lying, gently insert your thumb or index finger into your vagina. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles and try to feel your thumb/finger being squeezed.
4. Using a mirror, have a look at the area between your legs. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles. You may see the muscle around your back passage pucker up. You may also see the skin between the back passage and vagina lift away from the mirror. If you see the skin between the vagina and back passage bulging down towards the mirror – **stop** and seek advice from your physiotherapist or GP (family doctor).
5. A physiotherapist may (with your agreement) carry out an internal examination. This will help you locate your muscles and give you the confidence to know you are doing your exercises correctly. It will also aid your physiotherapist in planning your treatment programme.

## ***Your exercise programme***

This consists of 2 types of contractions: **slow** and **fast**. One set of exercises includes both fast and slow contractions.

### **Slow**

- Tighten up your pelvic floor muscles and see how long you can hold the contraction (the squeeze) for.
- **Relax fully** (for at least as long as you held the contraction).
- Now tighten and hold for the same length of hold as before.
- **Relax fully.**
- Repeat this until your muscles get tired.

How many seconds  
can you hold for? ..... secs

How many times  
could you repeat it? ..... times

Eventually you may be able to hold for 10 seconds,  
repeated 10 times.

### **Fast**

- Quickly tighten up your pelvic floor muscles.
- Hold for 1 second and then **relax fully**.
- Repeat this until your muscles get tired.

How many times could you repeat it? ..... times

Aim for 10 or more.

## ***Doing your exercises***

**To strengthen the muscles, repeat the number of slow and fast contractions (as shown on page 5) regularly throughout the day. Do at least 3 sets daily, either in lying, sitting or standing.**

Here are some tips to help you remember. Do your exercises:

- after you have finished on the toilet
- during programme breaks on TV
- waiting for the kettle to boil
- if you are a new mum, while sitting feeding your baby.

Try putting stickers in places that will catch your eye to remind you to do your exercises. You can also use the table on page 10 of this leaflet.

**Improve your control by tightening and holding your pelvic floor muscles before sneezing, coughing, running, pushing, pulling, jumping and lifting.**

## ***Continuing with your exercise programme***

**As you get stronger keep challenging your muscles.**

It may take 4 to 6 months to achieve good results but persevere – it will be worth it.

Once you have gained good control you should maintain your muscles by **exercising daily for the rest of your life.**



## Points to remember

- **Liquid intake**

You should drink approximately 1500 to 1800 mls (3 to 4 pints) of liquid a day

**Do not restrict** your intake – it will not reduce your symptoms. It could make matters worse.

- **Frequency of bladder emptying**

Try to avoid emptying your bladder too often as this can reduce the amount it can hold. If you feel you need to go more often than once every 2 hours (frequency) or when you feel the urge to empty your bladder soon after having done so, try delaying tactics. For example, stand still, try contracting your pelvic floor muscles, sit on something firm (such as the arm of a chair), concentrate on something else.

- **Bladder emptying**

Each time you go to the toilet it is important to completely empty the bladder without straining. Urine left inside the bladder may lead to an infection.

- **Do not routinely stop and start while passing urine.**

- **Seek further medical advice if:**

- ◆ your continence problem continues or
- ◆ you cannot feel your muscles working. You may need extra help in locating them (see page 11).

## Frequently asked questions

### ***Does being overweight have anything to do with my problem?***

Yes. Getting down to your correct weight will reduce the amount of strain placed on the pelvic floor muscles. This may improve your symptoms considerably.

### ***Does what I drink affect my symptoms?***

Yes.

- The average adult needs to drink 1500 to 1800mls (3 to 4 pints) of fluid each day to maintain good health. This amount needs to be increased in hot weather, during physical activity and when travelling.
- Certain substances can irritate and stimulate the bladder. These may cause more urine to be produced, meaning more frequent and possibly more urgent trips to the toilet. These substances include caffeine, alcohol and nicotine.

Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, cocoa, chocolate, some fizzy drinks and over the counter medications. If you need to reduce your caffeine intake, you may have to do this slowly to avoid any headaches.

Drink alcohol in moderation, no more than 14 units for women and 21 units for men per week is recommended.

- Drinking water is best.

***My symptoms are worse when I am constipated. Why?***

Straining to force your bowels open can eventually damage the pelvic floor muscles. Dietary changes, taking adequate fluids and exercise may help, or see your GP for advice.

***I sometimes leak when picking things up. What can I do to stop this happening?***

Lifting puts a strain on the pelvic floor. Before you lift remember to tighten your pelvic floor muscles and hold them tight until you have lowered the load.

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

Straight leg sit-ups and double leg lifts put severe pressure on the pelvic floor (and the back) and should **not** be done.

Activities that require a sustained hold put a greater strain on your pelvic floor muscles.

Also avoid high impact activity (such as aerobics, trampolining, jogging and skipping) while your muscles are weak. Gradually increase your activity level as your pelvic floor muscles get stronger. Contract your pelvic floor muscles while doing any activity.

## Exercise diary

You might like to use the table below (for the first 2 weeks) to remind you to do your exercises.

|   | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat | Sun |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 2 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 3 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 4 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 5 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 6 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |

|   | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat | Sun |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 2 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 3 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 4 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 5 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 6 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |

### Slow contractions

Hold for ..... secs

Rest for ..... secs

Repeat ..... times

### Fast contractions



Repeat ..... times

**For more help contact your GP or continence advisor. You may then be referred on to a specialist physiotherapist.**

### ***Useful addresses and websites***

**Bladder and Bowel Community** (offer written information, online support forums and campaign for better services). Their aim is to break down isolation, promote emotional wellbeing and encourage self help.

Bladder and Bowel Community  
7 The Court  
Holywell Business Park  
Northfield Road  
Southam  
CV47 0FS

General enquiries:  **01926 357220** 

Email: [help@bladderandbowelcommunity.org](mailto:help@bladderandbowelcommunity.org)

Website: [www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org](http://www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org)

Please note that NHS Grampian is not responsible or liable for the quality of the information, resources or maintenance of external websites. Any advice on external websites is not intended to replace a consultation with an appropriately qualified medical practitioner.



**This leaflet is also available in large print.**

**Other formats and languages can be supplied on request. For a copy please call Quality Development on (01224) 554149. Ask for leaflet 0186.**

Feedback from the public helped us to develop this leaflet. If you have any comments on how we can improve it, please call (01224) 554149 to let us know.

Other leaflets are available in this series:

*How to keep your bladder healthy*

*Urinary tract infection*