

Pelvic floor exercises for women

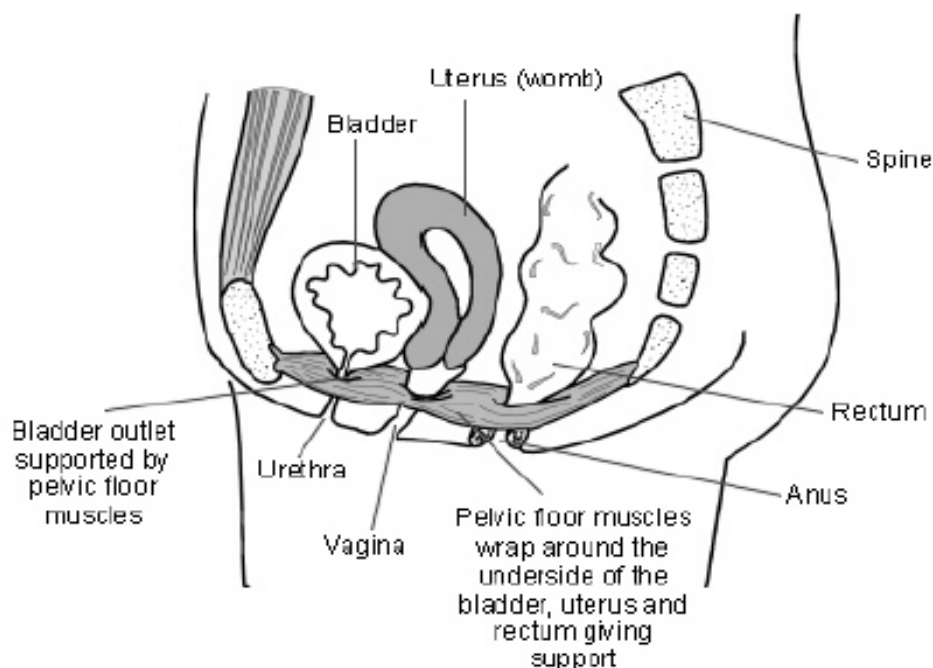
This leaflet explains what pelvic floor exercises are and why you should be performing them. If you have any questions, please ask a member of staff caring for you.

What is your pelvic floor and where is it?

The pelvic floor is a sheet of muscles that extend from your tail bone (coccyx) to your pubic bone at the front, forming a 'platform' between your legs. It provides the floor to your pelvis (the bottom part of your abdomen/ tummy) and supports the contents of your pelvis – your bladder, uterus (womb) and back passage.

It also controls the openings of the following organs, which pass through it:

- the urethra – the tube which you pass urine through
- the vagina – birth canal, important during intercourse
- the anus – back passage, through which you open your bowels.



Side view of a woman's pelvic organs and pelvic floor muscles.
Diagram copy EMIS and PiP 2006, as distributed on www.patient.co.uk

Sometimes the pelvic floor can weaken. If this happens you may experience a range of symptoms including:

- An aching or dragging sensation in your vagina.
- A feeling of something coming down inside your vagina, which may be due to a prolapse. This is where one or more organs in your pelvis, such as your womb or vagina drop down from their normal position.
- A tendency to leak urine when you cough, laugh or sneeze. This is called stress urinary incontinence.
- A need to go to the toilet frequently (referred to as frequency) during the day or night.
- An urgent need to visit the toilet and leaking before you get there or if you don't go (urge incontinence).
- An inability to control the passing of wind from your back passage.
- An urgent need to visit the toilet to empty your bowels and leaking stool before you get there or if you don't go (urge faecal incontinence)

Who should do pelvic floor exercises?

All women need to do pelvic floor exercises throughout their lives. Pelvic floor muscles may become weak:

- following childbirth
- through a lack of exercise
- as a result of the menopause
- following pelvic surgery, for example a hysterectomy (removal of your womb), or bladder repair
- by straining to open your bowels
- by being overweight
- having a chronic cough.

Pelvic floor exercises can help strengthen your muscles so that they can give your organs support again. This will improve your bladder/bowel control and improve or stop any leakage.

How to do pelvic floor exercises

Although with practice, pelvic floor exercises can be done anywhere and anytime, it is best to learn the exercises in the following position:

- Sit on a chair, toilet seat or toilet lid.
- Make sure that your feet are flat on the floor and your legs are slightly apart.
- Lean forwards, resting your elbows on your knees.

There are two types of exercises – **slow twitch** and **fast twitch**. It is important that you do the slow twitch first and then the fast twitch each time you exercise your pelvic floor muscles.

To perform the slow twitch exercises:

1. Close and draw up the muscles around back passage, as if you are trying to stop passing wind. Make sure that you do not contract your buttock muscles while you do this.
2. Now close and draw up the muscles around your vagina and urethra, as though you are trying to stop the flow of urine.
3. Hold for as long as you can. For example, for a count of 8 and then relax for a count of 8.
4. Then **slowly** relax and let go.

5. Slowly increase the length of time that you hold each contraction for and do as many as you can until you feel your muscle getting tired.

To perform the fast twitch exercises:

1. Pull up the pelvic floor muscles as before.
2. Hold for one second and then relax.
3. Repeat 5-10 times or until your muscles feel tired.

The pelvic floor muscles tire easily and you may notice that it takes a lot of concentration to begin with to do these exercises correctly.

If you find that the muscles 'let go' too quickly and that you cannot hold for a count of five, just hold them for as long as you can. Use this as your baseline. For example, if you can only hold the contraction for a count of three, then every time you do your exercises, contract the muscles for a count of three. Gradually try to work up to four, then five.

It is important to try **not to**:

- squeeze your buttocks together
- bring your knees together
- hold your breath
- lift your shoulders / eyebrows or toes upwards.

If you do any of these, you are not contracting (tightening) your muscles correctly.

How often should I do my exercises?

Aim to do your pelvic floor exercises on a daily basis and be sure to include both types of pelvic floor contractions (both fast and slow twitch). Fewer good squeezes are better than lots of half hearted ones, however, you should try to challenge yourself by attempting to increase both the number of repetitions and the holding time. If you do not see a change in your muscle strength after three months, ask for help from your continence nurse or your physiotherapist..

You can feel your pelvic floor contracting by putting one or two fingers into your vagina whilst having a bath or shower. Tighten your pelvic floor so that the muscles squeeze your finger hard.

Every two weeks, test the strength of your pelvic floor by stopping the flow of urine mid-stream. This will feel similar to the exercises above and uses the same muscles. You may not be able to completely stop the flow of urine to begin with, but you may notice that you are able to slow the flow down. This is your baseline assessment. Gradually over the weeks you should notice an improvement. It is important that you do not do this test more than once a fortnight as it may cause problems with your bladder. This is just a test to see how you are progressing.

Use 'the knack' – always try to brace your pelvic floor muscle (by squeezing up and holding your pelvic floor contraction) before you cough, laugh, sneeze, lift anything heavy, or prior to any activity which makes you leak.

Do not expect instant results!

It will take several weeks of regular exercise to regain the strength in your pelvic floor muscles. You need to do these exercises for the rest of your life. If you stop exercising, your problems will return.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Ellie Stewart on 020 7188 3671, Monday–Tuesday. You can leave a message for Ellie at any time and she will return your call as soon as possible.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Useful sources of information

The bladder and bowel foundation offers advice and assistance from specially trained nurses through their answerphone call-back service. It also has a wide range of leaflets on incontinence.

24 hour call-back service: 0845 345 0165 **t:** 01536 533 255

w: www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

PALS

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). Ask a member of staff to direct you to PALS or:

t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas' **t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Language Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about the care you are receiving in the language or format of your choice, please get in touch using the following contact details:

t: 020 7188 8815 **fax:** 020 7188 5953 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

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