

PELVIC FLOOR



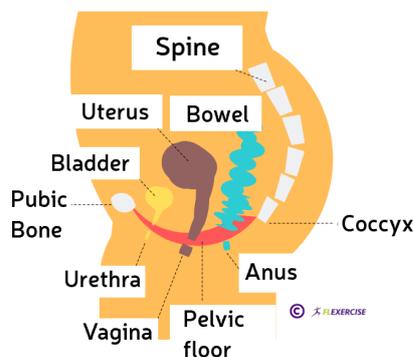
Are you really doing your pelvic floor exercises effectively or do you just think you are? Are you confused about what you should be doing but are too embarrassed to ask?

At FLexercise we want to help you understand your body and what happens to it, without embarrassment.

What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor muscles provide support to the organs that lie on it. Normally the pelvic floor muscles wrap tightly around the openings to keep them firmly shut. You can control the openings (sphincters) to control the release of urine, faeces (poo) and flatus (wind). When you have a wee or open your bowels, the pelvic floor muscles relax to allow this to happen, then they rapidly re-wrap around the openings again. Problems can arise when the pelvic floor doesn't return to normal.

Think of the pelvic floor as being like a hammock or a muscular trampoline stretching from the pubic bone at the front to the coccyx (tail bone) at the back, and from side to side. It has openings (sphincters) running through it for the urethra, vagina and anus. Having a strong pelvic floor helps us keep control of the bladder and bowel.



The pelvic floor can be weakened by a number of factors including childbirth, repeated straining to open your bowels (constipation), chronic coughing, lots of heavy lifting, menopause, lack of exercise and the ageing process. A weak pelvic floor can cause stress incontinence and vaginal/rectal prolapse.

How do I find my pelvic floor?

This can be tricky as there is nothing to see on the outside. Take a little time and try these suggestions. You will need to concentrate at first but eventually it will get easier.

- Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart or lie on your bed. Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind. To do this you must squeeze and lift the muscles around the back passage without clenching your buttocks or lifting your hips. You should be able to feel the muscles working and that the skin around your back passage is tightening and pulling up.
- Now imagine you are sitting on the toilet passing urine. Visualise trying to stop the flow mid stream. You will find you are almost using the same group of muscles but it can be quite hard to do. Please don't test this out while actually having a wee - it can lead to problems with bladder emptying and can cause infection.
- Finally, try to tighten and lift the muscles around your back passage, vagina and front passage as if trying to stop passing wind and urine at the same time whilst holding in a tampon. But remember, no buttock or thigh squeezing.

Pelvic floor exercises

Like any group of muscles, the pelvic floor muscles need regular exercise to keep them in tip top condition. This really is a case of 'use it or lose it'.

Pelvic floor exercises are a combination of slow and fast contraction work, which should be done lying, sitting and standing to make sure the pelvic floor is ready for any situation. The lower abdominal muscles should be gently pulled in all the time when doing them.

Exercise 1: slow contractions

These help prevent everyday leakages or urgency when queuing for the ladies.

- Draw in your lower abdominals
- Slowly draw up the whole of your pelvic floor and hold it for as long as you can, then gently release. Don't clench your buttocks or thighs.
- Rest for 4 seconds then repeat. Initially, your muscles may tire quickly but with practice your stamina will improve. You should be working towards 10 repetitions of the exercise

Exercise 2: fast contractions

These help prevent leaks when coughing, sneezing or laughing.

- Do exactly the same as in exercise 1, but in short and rapid bursts
- Draw the pelvic floor up rapidly, then slowly release it, with control.
- Aim to do 10 in quick succession. Don't clench your buttocks or thighs.

How often should I do my exercises?

Initially, aim for 10 of each exercise 3 times a day. It will take a couple of weeks for the muscles to start firing correctly and possibly up to 3 months before you feel any noticeable improvement, so it's important to keep at it.

Take time during your FLexercise class to really think about your pelvic floor.

It's important that you get into a habit or routine with the exercises. Why not try doing them while brushing your teeth, standing in the shower or waiting for the kettle to boil. Or whilst watching TV, waiting at traffic lights, or in a queue?

I've still got a leak problem

Please don't ignore it. Stress incontinence and bladder leaks are embarrassing and can really interfere with your daily life. No one should have to suffer. Protective underwear may help with the embarrassment but won't solve the problem.

Do talk to your GP who will be able to refer you for further help. Meanwhile, talk to your FLexercise teacher who will be able to focus on pelvic floor work in class.

Other helpful hints

- Drink normally. Make sure you don't reduce your fluid intake in an attempt to reduce leaks. Water is best. Try to avoid caffeine if you can.
- Don't get into the habit of going to the loo 'just in case'. This will inappropriately train your bladder. It is better to wait until your bladder is full.
- Watch your weight. Additional weight increases the pressure on your pelvic floor.
- Always pull your abdominal muscles in and pelvic floor up before lifting anything.
- If you can feel a cough or sneeze coming on, pull up your pelvic floor.
- Don't hold your breath while doing the exercises.

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