

Maintaining your pelvic floor



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Incontinence and pelvic floor muscle weakness are very common in older people but should not be accepted as inevitable.

The pelvic floor muscles play a key role in bladder and bowel control, so it is important to learn where they are and how to squeeze them correctly. And no, you don't have to be able to get on the floor to exercise your pelvic floor muscles! They can be done anywhere, anytime and without any equipment, and you are never too old to try!



What are pelvic floor muscles, and how do I find them?

The pelvic floor muscles support the pelvic organs (bladder, womb and bowel) and help with the control of your bladder and bowel. You can think of them like the exit doors of your bladder and bowel, and you can learn to close and open them by contracting and relaxing these muscles.

Pelvic floor muscles can become weakened by lifting heavy objects and straining on the toilet to empty your bladder or bowels. Your pelvic floor muscles should be relaxed when you are sitting on the toilet to empty your bladder or bowel.

Other things that can weaken your pelvic floor muscles are:

- pregnancy and birth
- the ageing process
- hormonal changes
- surgery
- chronic coughing.

It is important to do your pelvic floor muscle exercises every day to keep them strong. You can find these muscles by imagining you need to stop yourself passing wind or imagine stopping the stream of urine.

As a test to see if you have the right muscles, you could try to stop or slow the flow of urine on the toilet, but only do this as a one off. Do not do this every time you go to the toilet to empty your bladder. Once you have found the muscles, then you should practice squeezing and holding them when you are away from the toilet.

To prevent further weakening of your pelvic floor muscles you can tighten them with you lift heavy objects or cough and sneeze. This can also help to prevent urinary or faecal leakage.

Exercise and the pelvic floor

You maintain your pelvic health by maintaining a healthy body weight and muscle strength in your legs and pelvis. Exercises to help improve your muscle strength are:

- regular walking
- Tai Chi
- cycling
- yoga
- swimming

Key things to remember

- Do your pelvic floor muscle exercises every day.
- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles when coughing, sneezing and lifting objects.
- Avoid lifting heavy objects, or share the load between two people.
- Do some general exercise at least three times a week.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Avoid straining to empty your bladder or bowel.
- See a Nurse Continence Specialist or physiotherapist for extra help and a pelvic floor muscle assessment.

Menopause and the pelvic floor

The effects of menopause on the vaginal tissues may contribute to bladder control problems.

Some women can experience pelvic organ prolapse as they age. This is when one of the pelvic organs drops down into the vagina. Regular pelvic floor muscle exercises may help to support these organs and stop the prolapse from getting worse.

“After dribble”

A common problem for men, is “after dribble.” No matter how much you shake and dance, the last drop always goes in your pants! Doing two to three strong pelvic floor muscle squeezes and releases, just after you have passed urine, may help these last drops to go into the toilet instead of in your jocks!

Urine leakage after prostate surgery may also be improved with regular pelvic floor muscle exercises. Erectile dysfunction is another area of male pelvic health that may be improved with pelvic floor exercises.

Where can I get help?

We know from research that one in every three women cannot squeeze their muscles correctly, and many men are unaware that they have pelvic floor muscles too! It can be tricky exercise to learn because these muscles are inside your pelvis and you cannot see them.

If you need help finding your pelvic floor muscles, or you have any of the problems described in this article, contact the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66.

You may need to see a Nurse Continence Specialist or Pelvic Floor Physiotherapist for further assessment and advice, and the Continence Foundation of Australia can guide you to your nearest clinician.

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