



Looking after Your Pelvic Floor

Fact sheet

Like other muscles in the body, the pelvic floor needs exercise. A healthy, fit and strong pelvic floor is important to both men and women. Weak pelvic floor muscles can give rise to a range of embarrassing and unpleasant symptoms that can reduce quality of life.

Good pelvic floor muscle health is invaluable for life long continence AND also for sexual health. Pelvic floor muscle exercises will not only maintain your pelvic floor but they will improve, restore and maintain good sexual function as well.

Here are some key statistics relating to pelvic floor muscle health

- **1 in 3 women** leak urine when they laugh, cough or sneeze
- **1 in 3 women** suffer incontinence problems 5 years after childbirth
- **Yet only a third** of women with these symptoms seek help
- **1 in 10 men** suffer with continence problems such as experiencing a strong **urge to urinate, increasing frequency** of need to urinate, **leakage** of urine and **regular trips** to the bathroom at night
- Most people delay for up to 2 years and on average they wait 5 years before talking to their doctor. Many don't at all, simply because they are too embarrassed to do so!

What are pelvic floor muscles?

They are layers of muscles stretching like a hammock from the front to the back of the pelvis. They are firm and supportive, helping to hold the bowel, bladder and the uterus (in women) in place and control the outlets of the bladder and bowel. When you pass urine or have a bowel motion, the pelvic floor muscles relax. After emptying, they tighten again to restore control.

What are the causes of pelvic floor problems and who is at the highest risk?

- Childbirth is a big factor - due to the additional weight on the pelvic floor muscles and as a result of torn muscles
- Ageing can also cause pelvic floor problems - for example, the menopause in women results in reduced oestrogen levels which can weaken the pelvic floor muscles

- Pelvic surgery and prostate surgery (in men) can weaken the muscles in the pelvic floor
- People who are diabetic and/or obese are more prone to suffer as these conditions can also be contributing factors
- Simply not looking after your pelvic floor muscles can cause problems

The signs and symptoms to look out for

If you are a woman and you:

- leak urine on coughing, sneezing, laughing or physical exertion

- leak urine before reaching the toilet

- are menopausal

If you are a man and you:

- leak urine before reaching the toilet

- suffer post urination dribble

- have symptoms relating to erectile dysfunction



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Finding your pelvic floor

For women

Lie down on your back with your head resting on a pillow, bend your knees and keep your feet flat, about 50 cm apart – relax in this position.

First imagine stopping yourself passing wind, tighten the opening of the bowel, but not your thighs or buttocks.

Then squeeze the muscles around your vagina and front passage – imagine trying to stop the flow of urine.

Finally tighten the muscles around both the bowel and around the vagina and front passage together. As you squeeze focus on feeling the muscles lifting upwards and forwards towards the pubic bone. Try to avoid holding your breath, pulling in your abdomen or tensing your buttocks.

Some women may be able to hold for only 1-2 seconds and others as many as 8-10 seconds.

It is important to discover **your** length of hold, to relax and to feel the muscle let go.

For men

Lie down on your back with your head resting on a pillow, bend your knees and keep your feet flat, about 50 cm apart – relax in this position.

First imagine stopping yourself passing wind, tighten the opening of the bowel, but not your thighs or buttocks.

Then imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing urine.

Finally tighten muscles both at the front and back together. You may see the base of the penis move in and your testicles lift. Try to avoid holding your breath, pulling in your abdomen or tensing your buttocks.

Aim to hold for 5 seconds and when you let go, feel the muscles relax.

Some men can hold for 1-2 seconds at first and others 5-6 seconds. It is important to discover **your** length of hold, to relax and to feel the muscle let go.

Exercising your pelvic floor – for women and men

Exercises can be done while standing, sitting or lying down.

Exercise 1 | slow pull-ups

Tighten the pelvic floor muscles **slowly** and continue to tighten for up to 5 seconds. Let go and feel the muscles relax and return to their original position.

Rest for a count of 5 seconds and repeat this slow hold 5 times.

Exercise 2 | fast pull-ups

Tighten the pelvic floor muscles **quickly**, do not hold, and feel the muscle let go straight away. This helps you cope with quick movements or coughing.

Repeat this 5 times – approximately 1 contraction per second.

If you would like more information about pelvic floor exercises or other urological matters contact the **Bristol Urological Institute**, on 0117 959 5690 or visit our website at www.bui.ac.uk.

This leaflet is intended for general information only. If you have any concerns about your pelvic floor function you should obtain advice from your GP or contact your local Continence Adviser. Contact the Bladder and Bowel Foundation (B&BF) to find the details of your nearest NHS Continence Advisory Service on 01536 533255 or visit the B&BF website <http://www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org/continence-clinic-directory/>