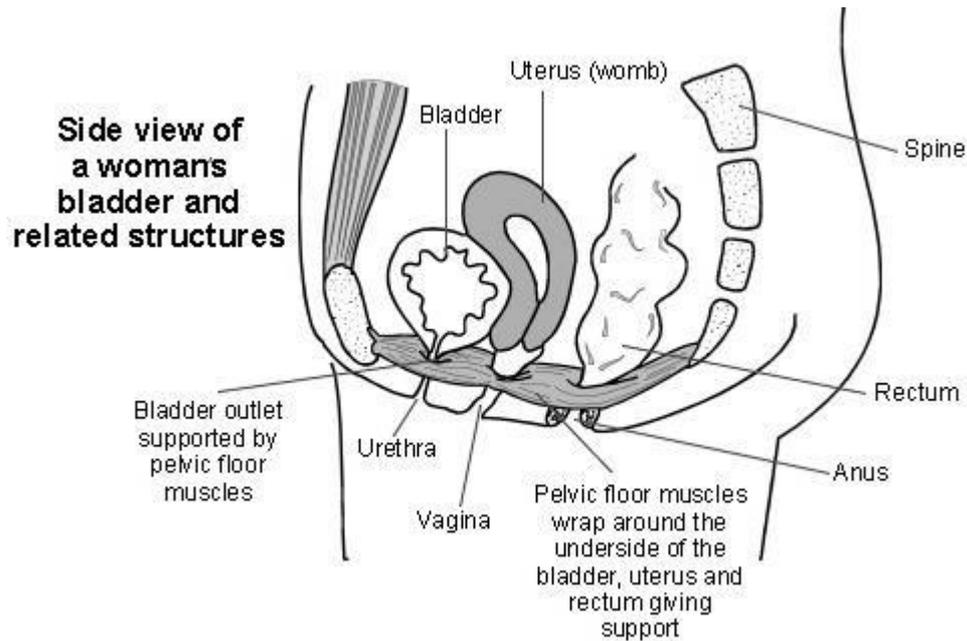


Women's health advice and exercise sheet

Pelvic floor muscles

The pelvic floor muscles are a 'hammock' of muscles underneath your pelvis. They are attached at the front of the pelvis to the pubic bone and span backwards to attach at the base of the spine around the sacrum and coccyx (tailbone). The opening of the bladder, birth canal (vagina) and the bowel all pass through the pelvic floor.



What does the pelvic floor do?

1. The pelvic floor muscles are continually working to help support your pelvic organs and abdominal content (bladder, uterus in women and bowel) from underneath and stop them dropping down.
2. The pelvic floor muscles help with bladder and bowel control. The pelvic floor muscles circle around the opening for the urethra, vagina and back passage and stop you leaking urine, wind or faeces. The muscles need to work harder when you cough or sneeze or on exertion to avoid leaking.
3. The pelvic floor muscles have an important sexual function, helping to increased sexual awareness for you and your partner during sexual intercourse.

Common disorders of the pelvic floor include urinary incontinence (leaking) or prolapse of the vaginal walls or the uterus. Like other muscles in the body, 'if you don't use them, you lose them'. They weaken and are no longer efficient at doing their job. The pelvic floor muscles are affected and can weaken for a variety of reasons:

- Childbirth
- Pelvic surgery
- The natural aging process
- Hormonal changes for example the menopause
- Obesity
- Chronic constipation
- Repetitive heavy lifting
- Smoking
- Medical conditions such as diabetes, multiple sclerosis and stroke
- Repetitive urine infections
- Chronic cough, chest infection and conditions such as asthma and COPD
- Hypermobility

Urinary incontinence

The average number of episodes of bladder emptying (voids) a day is 6 - 8 with a 2 - 3 hours between each void. This will depend on fluid intake. Normal fluid intake is about 1.5 - 2 litres a day. Nocturia describes the number of times you need to empty the bladder at night; this can vary from anything from 0 - 3 times, this can depend on factors such as age.

Stress incontinence

You may find you leak urine or flatus involuntarily when you cough, sneeze, laugh, run or jump. This is called stress incontinence. When you do any of these activities there is an increase in pressure in the abdomen and pushes down against the bladder and pelvic floor. The pelvic floor muscles can help by contracting (a reflex action) and squeeze the urethra shut.

Urge incontinence

Urgency is a strong desire to pass urine when the bladder is not full. You may suffer from a really strong need to pass urine which may result in urinary leakage. This is called urge incontinence. The bladder contracts when emptying and the pelvic floor relaxes. The pelvic floor can contract to prevent the bladder from contracting.

Mixed incontinence

This is a combination of both stress and urge incontinence.



Prolapses

Pelvic organ prolapses are common in women. For the majority of women prolapses are mild and do not cause any problems. However it may cause a heavy, dragging sensation and you may be aware of a bulge in the vagina. This can affect bladder, bowel and sexual function. There are different types of prolapses which may occur. We can discuss this further in your appointment.

Treatment

Pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor muscles need to be exercised like any other weak muscles. An individual programme is important and we will discuss this at your appointment, but here are some exercises to get you started. A pelvic floor contraction is performed by closing and drawing up your front and back passage. Imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine. The feeling is one of "squeeze and lift". In the beginning it may be easier to do the exercises lying down and then progress to sitting or standing. You can feel the correct muscles by placing your index finger or thumb into the vagina.

Do not:

- Pull in your stomach excessively
- Squeeze your legs together
- Tighten your buttocks
- Hold your breath

There are two types of pelvic floor exercises you should do:

1. Quick and strong

Squeeze as hard as you can and then let go completely. Rest a second and then repeat. Aim to build up to 10 in a row. This exercise will help you to contract your muscles quickly when you laugh, cough etc.

2. Endurance

Perform a pelvic floor contraction and this time try to hold it for as long as possible. Try to build up to holding for 10 seconds. You must feel the muscle relax.



Aim to repeat it as many times as you can, building up to a maximum of 10 times. Rest between each contraction for the same length of time you were able to hold it for. This exercise helps to prevent prolapsed and urge incontinence.

You must aim to do these exercises at least 3 times a day. Generally, it takes 3 - 6 months to get a muscle really strong again. Do not do so many that the muscle begins to ache, remember it is quality not quantity!

Tips

- Always tightened your pelvic floor muscles before you lift, cough or sneeze etc.
- To relieve the load on your pelvic floor, aim towards an acceptable weight for your height and build.
- Try to avoid constipation by eating sufficient dietary fibre and ensuring adequate fluid intake.
- Drink at least 1.5 litres a day, ideally water.
- Try to avoid food and drinks that irritate the bladder for example coffee, tea, hot chocolate, green tea, cola, citrus fruit and juices (eg orange, lemon, grapefruit, lime and tangerine), tomatoes, blackcurrant juice, alcohol.
- Drinks that **do not** irritate the bladder include water, milk, decaffeinated coffee, decaffeinated tea, herbal teas, milk shakes, diluted fruit juice.
- Do not get into the habit of going to the toilet 'just in case'. Emptying your bladder too frequently may reduce its capacity. Aim to go every 2 - 3 hours. If you feel you need to go more than every 2 hours, then try and train your bladder to wait longer. When you feel the urge, try to delay with techniques such as:
 - Stand still or sit down
 - Stay calm – do not panic
 - Contract your pelvic floor
 - Sit on something hard, like an arm of a chair or rolled up towel
 - Distract yourself
 - Wiggle your toes, go up and down on your toes, the nerve that supplies these are the same as your bladder and may help

- Wait until the urgency has passed and continue with normal activities – do not rush to the toilet mid urge
- Do not get into the habit of going to the toilet ‘just in case’. Emptying your bladder too frequently may reduce its capacity

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