

Patient information

Male pelvic floor advice and exercises

Men experience a variety of problems with their urinary system, leading to unwanted leakage of urine. Some also have difficulty controlling wind or leakage from the bowels; this can be due to a weakness of the muscles of the pelvic floor. Pelvic floor exercises have been shown to be effective to help ease these symptoms, particularly when caused by things such as surgery on the prostate.

The floor of the pelvis is made up of layers of muscle and other tissues stretching from side to side like a hammock and attached to your tail bone (coccyx) at the back and to the pubic bone in front. The urethra (bladder outlet) and the rectum (back passage) pass through the pelvic floor muscles. These muscles support the bladder and the bowel playing an important role in bladder and bowel control. They can be weakened by some operations for prostate issues; continual straining to empty your bowels, usually due to constipation; a chronic cough, such as smoker's cough or chronic bronchitis or asthma; being overweight.

Although there is no research evidence, it is thought by many that lack of general fitness and persistent heavy lifting tend to result in weakening of the pelvic floor.

Neurological damage (such as after a stroke, spinal injury or resulting from conditions like multiple sclerosis) can also produce poor pelvic muscle function. People in this group need to seek advice from a healthcare professional.

Pelvic floor exercises

You can improve control of your bladder and bowel by doing exercises to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. These exercises may also be useful in conjunction with a bladder retraining programme aimed at improving bladder control in people who experience the urgent need to

pass urine frequently and may not always 'make it in time'.

How to identify your pelvic floor muscles

The first thing to do is to identify correctly the muscles that need to be exercised.

1. Sit or lie comfortably with muscles of your thighs, buttocks and abdomen relaxed
2. Tighten the ring of muscle around the back passage as if you are trying to control diarrhoea or wind. Relax it. Practice this movement several times until you are sure you are exercising the correct muscle. Try not to squeeze your buttocks or tighten your thighs or tummy muscles
3. Imagine you are passing urine, trying to stop the flow mid-stream, then restarting it. If your technique is correct, each time that you tighten your pelvic floor muscles you may feel the base of your penis move up slightly towards your abdomen

If you are unable to feel a definite squeeze and lift action of your pelvic floor muscles, you should seek professional help to get your pelvic floor muscles working correctly. Even men with very weak pelvic floor muscles can be taught these exercises by a physiotherapist or continence advisor with expertise in this area.

Doing your pelvic floor exercises

Now that you can feel the muscles working, you can start to exercise them:

1. Tighten and draw in strongly the muscles around the anus and the urethra all at once. Lift them up inside. Try and hold this contraction strongly as you count to five (building up to a count of ten), then release slowly and relax for a few seconds. You should have a definite feeling of 'letting go'. Repeat five times, make each tightening a strong, slow and controlled contraction.
2. Now do five to ten short, fast, but strong contractions, pulling up and immediately letting go.

3. Do this whole exercise routine at least 4 to 5 times every day. You can do it in a variety of positions – lying, sitting, standing or walking.

Do your exercises well, the quality is important; fewer good exercises will be more beneficial than many half-hearted ones.

Do not hold your breath, push down instead of squeezing and lifting up or tighten your tummy, buttocks or thighs.

Make the exercises a daily routine

Once you have learnt how to do these exercises, they should be done regularly, giving each set your full attention. It might be helpful to have at least five regular times during the day for doing the exercises – for example, after going to the toilet, when having a drink, mealtimes, when lying in bed. You will wish to tighten your pelvic floor muscles also while you are getting up from a chair, coughing or lifting. Some men find that by tightening before they undertake such activities, they assist themselves in regaining control.

To build up your pelvic floor muscles to their maximum strength you will need to work hard at these exercises. You will probably not notice an improvement for several weeks and you will not reach your maximum performance for a few months.

When you have recovered control of your bladder or bowel you should continue doing the exercises twice a day for life.

Other tips to help your pelvic floor

- Avoid constipation and prevent any straining during a bowel movement
- Seek support and advice for hay-fever, asthma or bronchitis to reduce sneezing and coughing
- Keep your weight within the right range for your height and age
- Share the lifting of heavy loads

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