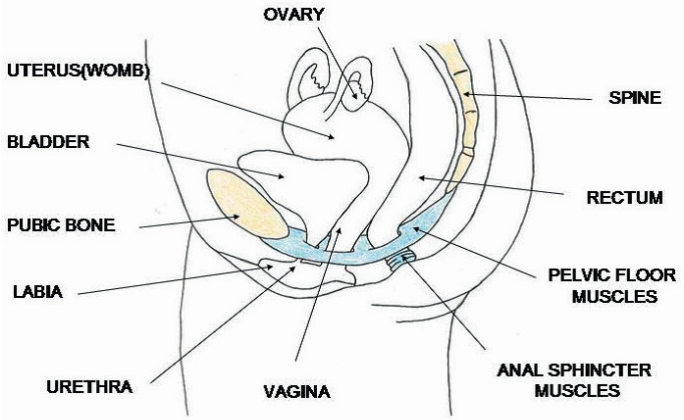
Royal Papworth Hospital
NHS Foundation Trust

Pelvic floor exercises for women

Patient information sheet

What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor consists of a 'sling' of muscles running from the front at the pubic bone, between the legs, to the bottom of the backbone. These muscles help support the pelvic organs, such as the bladder, bowel and the uterus (womb).



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Why does it need exercising?

If these muscles become weak, sudden stress on the bladder (such as coughing, laughing or sneezing) may cause you to leak urine. This is often called stress incontinence.

Many people are too embarrassed to discuss this with anyone and think it is a natural (irreversible) part of ageing and/or their illness and do not realise it is treatable and can be helped with pelvic floor exercises.

How to exercise your pelvic floor

Like any muscles the pelvic floor needs exercising to improve its strength.

First you need to find your pelvic floor muscles. Although these exercises are easy to do in any position you may find it easier to begin lying on your back with your knees bent up or sitting on the toilet.

Tighten the muscles around your front and back passage and lift up, as if you are stopping yourself passing water and wind at the same time. The movement is an upward and inward contraction, not a bearing-down effort.

A quick way of finding the right muscles is by trying to stop the flow of urine when you are using the toilet. Do not do this more than once a fortnight because you may start retaining urine.

If you are not sure you are exercising the right muscles, put a couple of fingers into your vagina. You should feel a gentle squeeze when doing the exercise.

- Do not hold your breath. You should be able to hold a conversation at the same time, or try counting aloud while you are doing the exercises.
- Do not tighten the tummy, thigh or buttock muscles. (A **gentle** tightening of the lower part of your tummy muscles is normal.)
- Do not squeeze your legs together.
- Do not raise your shoulders, toes or eyebrows.

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Slow contractions

Slow contractions help to increase the strength/ stamina of your pelvic floor. They help your muscles to hold back the urine.

- Lift your pelvic floor muscles as hard as you can.
- Hold the muscles tight for 10 seconds.
- Relax your muscles and rest for 10 seconds.
- Repeat the contractions up to 10 times.

You may find at first that you can only hold the contraction for one or two seconds, so concentrate on lifting your muscles and holding the contraction for as long as you can. Gradually increase the time until you reach 10 seconds.

Fast contractions

Fast contractions help your pelvic floor to cope with pressure, for example when you sneeze, cough or laugh. This works the muscles that quickly shut off the flow of urine.

- Lift your pelvic floor muscles quickly.
- Hold the contraction for one second.
- Relax the muscles and rest for one second.
- Repeat the contraction 10 times.

Now all you need to do is remember to do both of these exercises regularly! If you are doing them correctly no one will know when you are doing them.

Combine the exercises with an activity you do often such as washing up or when using your phone. You should aim to do the exercises at least three times a day.

The 'knack'

Once you can do these exercises easily you can add them to your daily activities.

Consciously squeezing your pelvic floor when you cough, laugh or sneeze (or anything else which causes you to leak urine) is called the 'knack'.

Remember to use the knack during your physiotherapy sessions.

How long should you do them for?

Life! The more you exercise your pelvic floor the stronger it will become. If you stop it will weaken again and your problem may return.

You should start to notice a difference within three months of beginning these exercises - if not seek further advice from your GP for referral into specialist services.

Further information

The Pelvic Obstetric & Gynaecological Physiotherapy (POGP) website has further details regarding Womens Pelvic Health: **thepogp.co.uk/patient_information/womens_health.aspx**

There are NHS Apps such as '**Squeezy**' or other free apps available which support completing your pelvic floor exercises.

Royal Papworth Hospital has no control over these apps and the data they use, so you will be signing up individually in line with the provider's T&Cs.

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