

Personal training for your pelvic floor muscles

Men and women of all ages may experience problems with their bladder, bowel, or sex life. These problems could be owing to weak pelvic floor muscles. It is important for both men and women to exercise these muscles.

What are pelvic floor muscles?

The pelvic floor muscles span the bottom of the pelvis. They are core muscles that support the pelvic organs and control the bladder and bowel. When toned, they also help with sexual function and satisfaction.

What causes weak pelvic floor muscles?

There are many possible causes of pelvic floor muscle weakness, for example:

- pregnancy and childbirth
- after prostate/pelvic surgery
- long term conditions or health problems such as a persistent cough or multiple sclerosis
- obesity
- constipation or persistent straining to empty the bowel
- menopause/hormonal changes
- ageing
- high impact sports
- repeated heavy lifting.

What are the symptoms of weak pelvic floor muscles?

Symptoms of weak pelvic floor muscles include:

- urinary leakage on coughing, laughing, sneezing, exercise or walking downstairs
- not being able to get to the toilet in time to empty the bladder or bowel
- difficulty emptying the bladder or bowel
- loss of sexual satisfaction
- women may develop a prolapse. This may feel like pelvic discomfort or the sensation of something 'coming down'
- men may find it difficult to achieve or maintain an erection.

How can weak pelvic floor muscles affect you?

Weak pelvic floor muscles may affect you in a number of ways, for example:

- worrying about going out because you think you might leak
- avoiding places because you don't know where the nearest toilet is
- avoiding activities which you know make you leak
- cutting down on the amount you drink
- loss of sex drive.

These can all affect your quality of life and how you feel about yourself.



Finding your pelvic floor muscles

It is important to exercise your pelvic floor muscles to help your bladder and bowel control. It may also improve your sex life. To do this, you need to make sure you are working the right muscles in the right way.

Imagine you are trying to stop yourself passing wind and at the same time trying to stop yourself from passing urine. It should feel like a 'squeeze and lift' inside. Men should be aware of a slight lift of the scrotum.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises

It is important to start by finding out what your muscles can do. Squeeze and lift your muscles. How long can you hold? How many times can you repeat this? This will be your starting point for your exercise routine.

You may need to build-up your routine, aiming towards doing this three times every day:

- Squeeze and lift as strongly as you can. Hold for ten seconds. Relax for ten seconds. Repeat ten times.
- Follow with ten fast squeezes. Squeeze and lift as hard and as briskly as you can and then let go completely.

It is important to breathe normally when you are doing your exercises. If you find you are holding your breath, try breathing out as you do the 'squeeze and lift'. Breathe normally as you continue to squeeze and lift.

If you stick to your daily personal training routine you should be able to feel the benefit of these exercises within three to five months. However, the muscles will lose their strength if you don't maintain the exercises.

Using your pelvic floor muscles in daily life

- Each time you feel you are about to cough or sneeze, quickly squeeze and lift your pelvic floor muscles as strongly as you can and try to hold them until the coughing/sneezing has finished.
- Whenever you think of it, squeeze and lift your pelvic floor muscles gently, especially during everyday activities such as standing from sitting, walking or climbing stairs.

Preventing problems

To help prevent a problem in the future, always 'squeeze and lift' your pelvic floor muscles before you lift heavy objects, cough or sneeze. Speak to your GP about improving other health problems, such as a persistent cough or constipation.



Getting help

If you think you need help with your exercise routine or it does not solve your problem you may need extra advice. Chartered physiotherapists working in continence care are experts in pelvic floor muscle exercise and rehabilitation. For further advice and information, contact:

- Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Women's Health (ACPWH) www.acpwh.org.uk
- Chartered Physiotherapists Promoting Continence (CPPC) www.cppc.org.uk

If you experience pain or discomfort or have any serious concerns contact your GP.