Pelvic floor exercises for women

This leaflet explains what pelvic floor exercises are and why you should be performing them. If you have any questions, please ask a member of staff caring for you.

What is your pelvic floor and where is it?
The pelvic floor is a sheet of muscles that extend from your tail bone (coccyx) to your pubic bone at the front, forming a ‘platform’ between your legs. It provides the floor to your pelvis (the bottom part of your abdomen/tummy) and supports the contents of your pelvis - your bladder, uterus (womb) and back passage.

It also controls the openings of these organs, which pass through it:
- the urethra - the tube which you pass urine through
- the vagina - birth canal, important during intercourse
- the anus - back passage, through which you open your bowels.

Sometimes the pelvic floor can weaken. If this happens you may experience a range of symptoms including:
- An aching or dragging sensation in your vagina.
- A feeling of something coming down inside your vagina, which may be due to a prolapse. This is where one or more organs in your pelvis, such as your womb or vagina drop down from their normal position.
• A tendency to leak urine when you cough, laugh or sneeze. This is called stress urinary incontinence.
• A need to go to the toilet frequently (referred to as frequency) during the day or night.
• An urgent need to visit the toilet and leaking before you get there or if you don’t go (urge incontinence).
• An inability to control the passing of wind from your back passage.

Who should do pelvic floor exercises?
All women need to do pelvic floor exercises throughout their lives. Pelvic floor muscles may become weak:
• following childbirth
• through a lack of exercise
• as a result of the menopause
• following pelvic surgery, for example a hysterectomy (removal of your womb), or bladder repair
• by straining to open your bowels
• by being overweight
• having a chronic cough.

Pelvic floor exercises can help strengthen your muscles so that they can give your organs support again. This will improve your bladder/ bowel control and improve or stop any leakage.

For more information on how to look after your pelvic floor, please read the leaflet, Caring for your pelvic floor muscles. Please ask a member of staff for a copy.

How to do pelvic floor exercises
Although with practice, pelvic floor exercises can be done anywhere and anytime, it is best to learn the exercises in the following position:

Sit on a chair, toilet seat or toilet lid. Make sure that your feet are flat on the floor and your legs are slightly apart. Lean forwards, resting your elbows on your knees.

There are two types of exercises – slow twitch and fast twitch. It is important that you do the slow twitch first and then the fast twitch each time you exercise your pelvic floor muscles.

To perform the slow twitch exercises:
1. Close and draw up the muscles around back passage, as if you are trying to stop passing wind. Make sure that you do not contract your buttock muscles while you do this.
2. Now close and draw up the muscles around your vagina and urethra, as though you are trying to stop the flow of urine.
3. Hold for a count of five. Try not to hold your breath, breathe normally.
4. Then slowly relax and let go.
5. Repeat five times in total

To perform the fast twitch exercises:
1. Pull up the pelvic floor muscles as before.
2. Hold for one second and then relax.
3. Repeat 5-10 times or until your muscles feel tired.

The pelvic floor muscles tire easily and you may notice that it takes a lot of concentration to begin with to do these exercises correctly.

If you find that the muscles ‘let go’ too quickly and that you cannot hold for a count of five, just hold them for as long as you can. Use this as your baseline. For example, if you can only hold the contraction for a count of three, then every time you do your exercises, contract the muscles for a count of three. Gradually try to work up to four, then five.

It is important to try not to:
• squeeze your buttocks together
• bring your knees together
• hold your breath
• lift your shoulders/ eyebrows or toes upwards.
If you do any of these, you are not contracting (tightening) your muscles correctly.

**How often should I do my exercises?**
Practice five pelvic floor contractions (as explained previously) five times a day. Make sure that it is a good contraction every time.

You can feel your pelvic floor contracting by putting one or two fingers into your vagina whilst having a bath or shower. Tighten your pelvic floor so that the muscles squeeze your finger hard.

Every two weeks, test the strength of your pelvic floor by stopping the flow of urine mid-stream. This will feel similar to the exercises above and uses the same muscles. You may not be able to completely stop the flow of urine to begin with, but you may notice that you are able to slow the flow down. This is your baseline assessment. Gradually over the weeks you should notice an improvement. It is important that you do not do this test more than once a fortnight as it may cause problems with your bladder. This is just a test to see how you are progressing.

**Do not expect instant results!**
It will take several weeks of regular exercise to regain the strength in your pelvic floor muscles. You need to do these exercises for the rest of your life. If you stop exercising, your problems will return.

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**Useful contact numbers**
The bladder and bowel foundation offers advice and assistance from specially trained nurses through their answerphone call-back service. It also has a wide range of leaflets on incontinence.

Call-back service: 0845 345 0165 (you can leave a message 24 hours and a General enquiries: 01536 533 255
w: www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

Incontact
Incontact is a charity which supports people and carers with incontinence problems. Call 0870 770 3246 or visit www.incontact.org

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**Who can I contact for further information?**
If you have any questions or concerns, please contact your GP or a member of staff involved in your care at the hospital.

PALS
If you need information, support or advice about our services, you can contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). Ask a member of hospital staff to direct you to the PALS office or phone 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas’ or 020 7188 8803 at Guy’s.
Email pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Language Support Services
If you need an interpreter or information about the care you are receiving in the language or format of your choice, please call 020 7188 8815, fax 020 7188 5953 or email languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk