



Pelvic Floor Muscles

What Is The Pelvic Floor?

The pelvic floor is a set of muscles that spread across the bottom of the pelvic cavity like a hammock. The pelvic floor has three openings that run through it for females, the urethra, the vagina and the rectum and two openings for males, the urethra and the rectum. The functions of the pelvic floor include:

- To support the pelvic organs, specifically the uterus, the bladder, the prostate and the rectum
- To help provide sphincter control for the bladder and bowel
- To withstand increases in pressure that occur in the abdomen such as coughing, sneezing, laughing, straining and lifting
- To enhance the sexual response

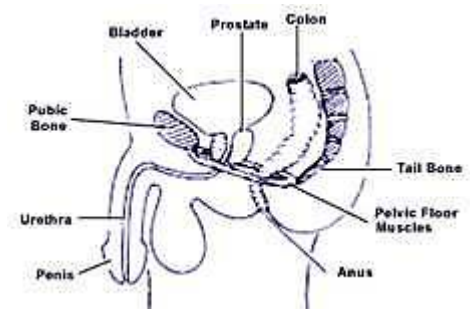
What are the consequences of a weak pelvic floor?

When a woman ages, the pelvic floor muscles may begin to sag and weaken as a result of stress placed on them. Many conditions can stress the pelvic floor including:

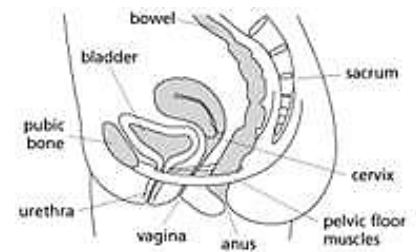
- Pregnancy-related changes in the body
- Heavy straining during childbirth
- Damage to the pelvic floor sustained during childbirth
- Repeated straining such as during bowel movements, or with chronic cough
- Repetitive heavy lifting

As a woman goes through menopause, estrogen levels fall. This leads to a weakening of the pelvic floor muscles. Weak pelvic floor muscles can result in pelvic organ prolapse (when one of your pelvic organs falls out of place or through the vaginal canal). Prolapse can occur to your bladder, urethra, uterus, rectum, intestine, and vagina. Other consequences of a weak pelvic floor include the involuntary leakage of urine or stool (urinary and fecal incontinence).

Male



Female



What are the benefits of strengthening the pelvic floor?

- Maintenance of strength tone and elasticity of the pelvic floor muscles (this helps support the abdominal and pelvic contents against gravity)
- Helps with bladder and bowel control
- Improves sexual response for both you and your partner

How do I recognize the muscles?

It can be difficult to learn how to correctly contract your pelvic floor muscles. These are several ways to identify if you are activating the correct muscles:

- Sit on the toilet. Empty a small amount of urine and try to stop the flow of urine. Relax completely and allow your bladder to empty. If you cannot stop the flow of urine, it is a sign of pelvic floor muscle weakness. If you are successful then you have the basic feel for the technique on contracting your pelvic floor muscles. **It is important to not get in the habit of stopping your urine midstream. This can lead to urinary tract infections and incomplete emptying of the bladder. Perform this technique only 1x a month to check your progress.**
- Insert one finger into the vagina and tighten your pelvic floor by squeezing around your finger. You should feel your vagina tighten around your finger and the pelvic floor move up slightly. Relax and you will feel the pelvic floor lower. Or, tighten the anus as if you were going to stop gas.

How do I start doing Kegel exercises?

When learning to do Kegel exercises it is best to start doing them in a position that will allow you to isolate the pelvic floor muscles. Try sitting on a hard surface or lying on your back with your knees bent.

- Contract your pelvic floor in the same manner as you did when you identified the muscles above
- Breathe in through your nose and contract pelvic floor muscles as you exhale through your mouth; hold the contraction for one to two seconds
- Relax all the way for 2 seconds

Once you can hold the contraction for 2 seconds, increase the hold to 3 seconds alternating it with a 10 second rest period. Continue increasing the hold time until you can hold a contraction for 10 seconds. Be sure you allow a rest period of the same length of hold between each contraction. Eventually the goal is to hold 10 seconds and rest 10 seconds (which may take several months to achieve). **Do this 2x a day for 20 repetitions in the morning and at night.**

It is important to perform quick contractions or “quick flicks.” Squeeze your pelvic floor for 1 second and rest for 5 seconds for 25 repetitions around lunch time. During this exercise, focus on the relationship between your breathing and pelvic floor muscles. Learning to coordinate and contract the pelvic floor with exhalation is a practical technique for bladder control. This exercise focuses on your fast twitch muscle fibers that “catch” your urine when you cough, sneeze or laugh. This is why it is useful to contract the pelvic floor during exhalation which occurs when you cough, sneeze and laugh.

Your program for success: 20 10 sec. squeeze with 10 sec. rest in the morning
25 1 sec. squeeze with 5 sec. rest at lunch
20 10 sec. squeeze with 10 sec. rest in the evening
65 total contractions a day of sustained and quick contractions

To get the most out of your exercises be sure you use only the pelvic floor muscles and not your buttocks, thigh or abdominal muscles. No other muscle movement will be seen if you are doing the exercises correctly. This way you are isolating your pelvic floor and not confusing contractions with using other muscles. It is also important not to hold your breath while doing Kegels. Breathe normally and focus on the pelvic floor muscles tightening and relaxing. Holding your breath makes it more difficult for the muscles to work properly.

When you first begin doing the exercises you may notice that it is difficult to maintain the contraction, and the muscles do not want to stay tightened for very long. When you feel the muscles let go, tighten them again. In a week or two you will notice that the control improves.

How do I progress my Kegel exercises?

Once you feel you can perform the exercises well lying down, try them in sitting and then in standing. It is also a good idea to work them into your daily routine (i.e. while brushing teeth, at a stop light or watching TV). This makes it easier to make a habit of doing the exercise every day. It can take 3-6 months to build muscle bulk in the pelvic floor, so keep at it! Your pelvic floor muscles are like other muscles in your body, and you have to maintain their strength just like you would your biceps.

What do I do if I have problems or develop incontinence (leaking urine)?

If you are experiencing incontinence and are leaking urine or frequently going to the bathroom, conservative “bladder retraining” techniques can help.

If you try the above instructions and still cannot get a proper contraction of the muscles, pelvic floor biofeedback therapy can help. Pelvic floor biofeedback therapy is a treatment intended to help patients learn to strengthen and relax their pelvic floor muscles through using special computer equipment that measures muscle activity and displays a graph on a computer screen for the patient to “see” what their muscles are doing. Patients can learn to use their muscles to decrease the sudden urge to urinate, decrease leaks and lessen certain types of pelvic pain.