

# Pelvic floor exercises for women

Pelvic floor muscle exercises are a very effective method of treatment for women with bladder problems, in particular, stress incontinence

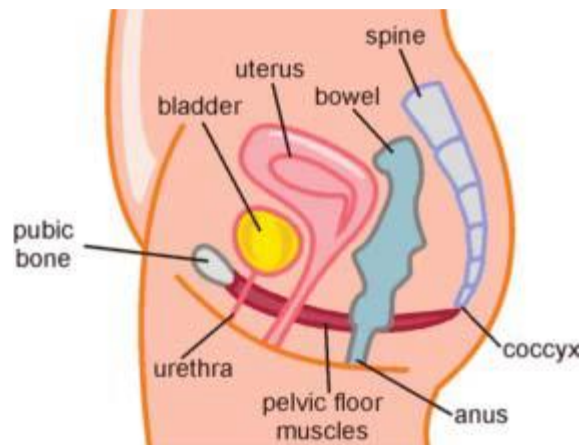
Stress incontinence is when you leak urine (wee) when you cough, laugh or do exercises like running and jumping because you have weak pelvic floor muscles.

## About your pelvic floor

### Where is your pelvic floor?

Your pelvic floor is a set of muscles that reaches from your pubic bone at the front, to your coccyx at the base of your spine.

They form squeezing muscles around the anus, vagina and the urethra (the tube which carries wee from the bladder) and are the muscles you use when you want to stop yourself passing wind or urinating.



### Why is it important to do pelvic floor exercises?

Exercises help to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. A strong pelvic floor will help to prevent bladder and bowel incontinence by supporting your bladder, womb and bowel to function normally. It can also help to improve your sex life.

## What causes a weak pelvic floor?

There are many causes of a weak pelvic floor including:

- Childbirth
- Menopause
- Poor fitness
- Being overweight
- Constipation
- Pregnancy
- Long-term or recurring coughing

As a result some people experience **stress incontinence**, while others experience sudden urges to wee and may leak before they get to the toilet. This is described as **urge incontinence**.

Exercising the pelvic floor muscles is helpful in both of these conditions.

## Exercising the muscles

### How do I know which muscle to exercise?

If you don't know where your pelvic floor is, you can find it by imagining you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time stopping your flow of urine. Or you can put your thumb just inside your vagina facing the back; you should feel the muscle move around your thumb. The muscles you use to do this are your pelvic floor muscles.

### How do I exercise the muscles?

You must do fast and slow exercises to make your pelvic floor muscles stronger. It is important to learn to do the exercises in the right way and to check from time to time that you are still doing them correctly.

#### Slow exercises

You should sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Squeeze as if you are trying to stop passing wind and at the same time are trying to stop passing urine. The muscles should feel as though they 'lift and squeeze.' Do not use your tummy muscles or your bottom when you are doing this exercise. Your bottom and leg should not move at all.

Hold for as long as you can – up to six seconds. You may not be able to hold it for more than two or three seconds at first. Repeat this up to 10 times but have a rest in between each one for three or four seconds.

#### Fast exercises

It is also important to train your pelvic floor muscles to react quickly to stop you leaking when you cough or sneeze: practice tightening your pelvic floor quickly and then relax.

Fast exercises are done in the same way as slow exercises but when you squeeze the muscles, let go immediately so that you only feel a very quick lift in your pelvic floor.

You should repeat these exercises as many times as possible, up to 10 times.

If you are unable to feel a definite squeeze and lift, you should seek further advice from our Continence Advisory Service or your GP as there are other treatments that you may benefit from.

## When should I do them?

Once you have mastered the technique, you can do them in any position, at all times of the day. You may find it easier to link it to a particular activity, for example washing your hands.

Aim to do both the fast and slow exercises at least three times a day. Your muscles will improve and strengthen with time and exercise.

You will need to do the exercises regularly (ideally every day) for three months before you will see any changes. Once you have started to see an improvement, the exercises need to be continued to see further results and to maintain the improvement that has been achieved so far.

Ideally, pelvic floor exercises should be part of every woman's daily activity, whether you have an incontinence problem or not. This will help to keep the muscle strong and healthy.

## Helpful tips

- You can avoid straining when on the toilet by sitting relaxed on the seat with your feet supported and knees higher than your hips
- Seek medical advice for hayfever, asthma and bronchitis to reduce sneezing and coughing
- Avoid tea, coffee and cola. These contain caffeine and may irritate the bladder
- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles before coughing, sneezing or lifting
- If you are overweight, losing weight helps to reduce extra strain on the pelvic floor muscles
- Avoid lifting heavy weights

It can take three to five months before you notice an improvement so it's important to be persistent

## About the Continence Advisory Service

We provide a variety of specialist continence treatments and advice for anyone with bladder or bowel problems.

You do not need to be incontinent to receive treatment and support from us. For example, you may feel that you go to the toilet too frequently, or that your bladder or bowels are limiting your lifestyle.

Your GP or any other healthcare professional can refer you to our service. Otherwise you can contact us directly to refer yourself to the service or, with your consent, a friend or relative can do this for you.

### How to contact us

Call: **0118 949 5145** or **0118 949 5146**

Email: **continence@berkshire.nhs.uk**

You can find details of our clinics and hospitals on our website

Web: **berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/continence-advice-service**

