



# The Thoughtful Body™: Pelvic floor exercise

## What is the Pelvic Floor?

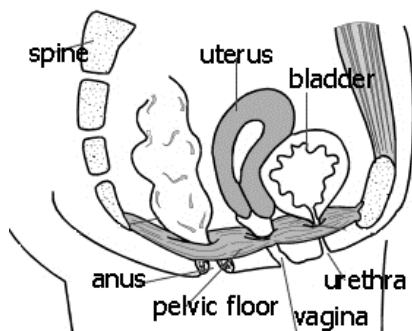
The term pelvic floor is actually quite misleading. One imagines a floor to be flat and square but the pelvic floor is hammock or dome shaped. It consists of interwoven muscles that run across from the tailbone (coccyx) to the back of the pubic bones and fan out into the pelvis, forming a basin. You can help yourself find the pubic bone if you walk your fingers down from your belly button until you reach a bony ridge – this is your pubic bone. The coccyx is situated at the very end of your spine and can be felt by walking your fingers to the end of your spine. This will give you an idea of where the pelvic floor muscles are situated, between these two landmarks.

There are many muscles that make up the pelvic floor and they are all integrated. They slant at different angles and levels as they attach themselves to different parts of the pelvis. This enables them to be worked at different angles. You are working your pelvic floor muscles when you have to hold on when you need to go to the bathroom or if you are in company and do not wish to break wind. The sensation is the same for men as it is for women. The pelvic floor is elastic and moveable, varying in strength and firmness depending upon where a particular muscle attaches itself to the bony wall of the pelvis.

## Why exercise the Pelvic Floor?

The importance of the pelvic floor can be demonstrated when we look at what lies above it.

In a woman there is the bladder, uterus and bowel with openings in the urethra, vagina and anus. In a man there is the bladder and bowel, with openings in the penis and anus.



The pelvic floor supports these organs, as well as the weight of the rest of the body bearing down upon it. Good toning of the pelvic floor is critical for long-term health and function of the organs. It also helps to support the spine and helps the deep abdominal muscles to fire (work).

Men, this means you too! Good pelvic floor tone has been suggested to help prevent prostate cancer in men. It also helps guard against stress incontinence in later life.

## What Weakens the Pelvic Floor?

If we lived in a native culture we would squat on a daily basis; this makes the pelvic floor work hard. We would probably be working in fields or shinning up trees, all activities that help exercise the pelvic floor. Due to our modern lifestyle – sitting on chairs, driving and generally doing less exercise, the muscles are not worked to their full capacity.

Constitutionally, women are very different from men and should avoid doing anything that will put a repetitive strain on these muscles. This includes being overweight, constipation, smoker's cough, high impact aerobics, constantly lifting heavy things, repetitive sneezing due to allergies and even doing strenuous abdominal exercise.

Pregnancy is one of the main factors involved in weakening the pelvic floor (due to the weight of the growing baby, the changes in hormones or a long labour). Multiple births or big babies can create a weakness through the perineum. The perineal body is the area between the vagina and anus in women and between the testicles and anus in men. Many of the pelvic muscles unite here so the layers of the muscles are at their thickest. This could be described as the pivotal point for the pelvic floor.

Many women suffer from stress incontinence after giving birth because the pelvic floor may have been over-stretched or damaged due to a tear or episiotomy. During birth, the shape of the pelvic floor helps the baby's head to rotate. When relaxed, the perineum also assists in defecation. If the muscles have been stretched or weakened, pelvic floor exercises can help.

## Exercising the Pelvic Floor

Most muscles consist of two types of fibre that help them in the activities they need to carry out. When we are standing or squatting, for example, we use the slow twitch fibres of the muscle.

When we do an activity that requires a quick response, such as running for the bus or stopping ourselves from "having an accident", we predominately activate the fast twitch muscle fibres. We need to work *both* types of muscle fibre to create a strong and balanced pelvic floor.

If you are unsure about finding your pelvic floor muscles then sit on a soft surface such as your mattress or a chair, with your legs slightly apart.

Put your fist into your mouth and cough, and you should feel the pelvic floor muscles between your legs move outwards against the chair. Now all you need to do is to pull them up in the opposite direction. If you are still uncertain, imagine that you need to wee or break wind (or worse still, both together) and you are trying to stop yourself. The muscles you would use are your pelvic floor muscles. If you are still unsure do not worry: the muscles may need a little time to begin to work or strengthen, especially if you have not worked them before.

If your buttocks, inner thighs or backs of your legs tighten, then you are not using your pelvic floor muscles. It may be a good idea to tighten each of these other muscles first, so that you know what this feels like. Try and keep a feeling of relaxation in these other muscles when you are working the pelvic floor.

Pelvic floor exercises used to be taught by encouraging a person to stop their flow of urine mid-stream. It has since been discovered that some women were unable to start the flow of urine again and others would do it too often, thereby encouraging infection in the area. It is now considered better to *imagine* stopping the flow, rather than actually doing it. Although this may be tricky initially, do keep practising it: muscles are muscles and, with a little encouragement, they will start working again.

## Exercises

### Exercise 1

- Imagine that you are holding on to go to the toilet
- Pull the pelvic floor muscles up and in
- Hold the position for three counts
- Then release back to the starting position, have a short rest
- Repeat as many times as you can, until you feel the muscles begin to tire
- Breathe normally as you do the exercise

As you get stronger you will be able to hold the position for longer.

This can help activate your deep abdominal muscles to support your pelvis and spine.

This exercise works slow twitch muscle fibre.

### Exercise 2 – The lift

- Pull the muscles up and in as before, but this time only hold for one second or so before pulling the muscles in a little more. Try and make the second contraction stronger than the first, as if your pelvic floor muscles were a lift you were pulling up in stages
- Release, rest and start again
- Breathe normally as you do the exercise

This exercise works slow twitch muscle fibre.

### Exercise 3

- Try and do lots of little contractions with no rest between - it feels a little like a pulse
- Breathe normally as you do the exercise

This exercise works fast twitch muscle fibre.

## Exercise Positions

You can try the exercises in 7 different positions to help you create more balance and all-round strength in the pelvis.



1. Lying on your back, knees bent



2. Lying flat on your back



3. Lying on your front



4. On all fours



5. Standing



6. Sitting



7. Side-lying

If any of the positions cause pain or discomfort then please stop the exercise and consult your doctor.

Try to do each of the exercises for 2-3 minutes or until the muscles begin to tire. Make sure that you rest between each exercise. You could try to do one or two positions a day – sitting at work, or when waiting for the kettle to boil etc. Continue these exercises for a minimum of six to twelve weeks.

### Important note

This leaflet is intended only as a general guide to pelvic floor exercise. The information contained in this leaflet does not indicate that the exercises or information given are suitable for you or for any specific conditions. There are some situations where exercising the pelvic floor may not help. If your symptoms persist, you should contact your GP or practice nurse.



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