

PELVIC FLOOR INFORMATION

Working Your Pelvic Floor

Although it is hidden from view, your pelvic floor muscles can be consciously controlled and therefore trained, much like your arm, leg or abdominal (tummy) muscles. Strengthening your pelvic floor muscles will help you to actively support your bladder and bowel. This improves bladder and bowel control and reduce the likelihood of accidentally leaking from your bladder or bowel. Like other muscles in your body, your pelvic floor muscles will become stronger with a regular exercise program. This is important for both men and women.

Speak to a continence professional who can assess your pelvic floor and develop an individualised pelvic floor muscle training program for you.

The Benefits of Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

Pelvic floor muscle exercises can help:

- Improve bladder and bowel control.
- Reduce the risk of prolapse
 - In women, this may be felt as a bulge in the vagina or a feeling of heaviness, discomfort, pulling, dragging or dropping.
 - In men, this may be felt as a bulge in the rectum or a feeling of needing to use their bowels but not actually needing to go.
- Improve recovery from childbirth and gynaecological surgery (in women)
- Improve recovery after prostate surgery (in men)
- Increase sexual sensation and orgasmic potential, and
- Increase social confidence and quality of life.

Before starting a pelvic floor muscle training program, it is important that you can identify your pelvic floor muscles correctly. Speak to a **continence professional** if you have difficulty identifying your pelvic floor muscles, are unsure if you are performing the exercises correctly or are continuing to experience bladder or bowel control symptoms.

It is best to have a **continence professional** assess your pelvic floor and develop an individualised pelvic floor muscle training program for you.

How can I find my pelvic floor muscles?

The first step in performing pelvic floor muscle exercises is to identify the correct muscles. There are several ways to identify them.

Go to www.continence.org.au for a 3D video showing you exactly how the pelvic floor moves and supports the bladder, bowel and other pelvic organs.

Method 1 – Stopping the Flow

One way to identify your pelvic floor muscles is to try and stop or slow the flow of urine midway through emptying your bladder. Stopping the flow of urine repeatedly on the toilet is **not** an exercise, but a way of identifying your pelvic floor muscles. This should be done to identify which muscles are needed for bladder control.

If you can, stop the flow of urine over the toilet for a second or two, then relax and finish emptying without straining. This “stop test” may help you identify the muscles around the front passage which control the flow of urine. It is not recommended as a regular exercise.

Method 2 – Visualisation

Another method to identify your pelvic floor muscles is to imagine stopping the flow of urine and holding in flatus (wind) at the same time. This can be done lying down, sitting or standing with legs about shoulder width apart.

- Relax the muscles of your thighs, bottom and tummy.
- Lift and tighten the muscles around the front passage as if trying to stop the flow of urine.
- Lift and tighten the muscles around the vagina so they move upwards inside the pelvis.
- Lift and squeeze in the muscles around the back passage as if trying to stop passing wind.
- The muscles around the front and back passages should lift and squeeze up and inside the pelvis.
- Identify the muscles that contract when you do all these things together. Then relax and loosen them.
- Put this together so the muscles around the front and back passages lift and then you should feel them squeeze up inside the pelvis.
- Women who are familiar with using tampons can imagine lifting and squeezing in the vagina as if drawing a tampon up higher in the vagina.

This is the most important part of the pelvic floor muscle exercises as there is no point doing them if you are not doing them correctly.

Imagine letting go like you would to pass urine or to pass wind. Let your tummy muscles hand loose too. See if you can lift and then squeeze in and hold the muscles inside the pelvis while you breathe. Nothing above the belly button should tighten or tense. Some tensing and flattening of the lower part of the abdominal wall will happen. This is not a problem, as this part of the tummy works together with the pelvic floor muscles.

Try tightening your muscles really gently to feel just the pelvic floor muscles lifting and squeezing in. If you cannot feel your muscles contracting, change your position and do this again. For example, if you cannot feel your muscles contracting in a seated position, use a lying down or standing up position instead.

After a contraction it is important to relax the muscles. This will allow you muscles to recover from the previous contraction and prepare for the next contraction. It is common to try too hard and have too many outside muscles tighten. This is an internal exercise and correct technique is vital. Doing pelvic floor muscles the wrong way can be bad for you, so please see a continence professional if you cannot feel your muscles hold or relax.

The Training Program

Once you master the art of contracting your pelvic floor muscles, try holding inward squeeze for longer (up to 10 seconds) before relaxing. If you feel comfortable doing this, repeat it up to 10 times.

This can be done three times a day. Make sure you continue to breathe normally while you squeeze in.

You can do the exercise lying down, sitting or standing with your legs apart, but make sure your thighs, bottom and stomach muscles are relaxed.

Linking the exercises to a regular activity such as meal times or brushing your teeth is a good way to incorporate pelvic floor exercises into your daily routine.

When to Seek Professional Help

Seek professional help when you have bladder or bowel control problems with symptoms such as:

- Needing to urgently or frequently go to the toilet to pass urine or bowel motions.
- Accidental leaking of urine, bowel motions or wind.
- Difficulty emptying your bladder or bowel.
- Vaginal heaviness or a bulge, or
- Pain in the back or pelvic area when exercising the pelvic floor or during intercourse.

These problems may not necessarily be linked to pelvic floor muscle problems, so it is important that you are properly assessed.

Like all exercises, pelvic floor muscle exercises are most effective when individually tailored and monitored. The exercise program prescribed here is only a guide and may not help if done incorrectly or if the training program is inappropriate.

Speak to a **continence professional** who can assess your pelvic floor and develop and individualised pelvic floor muscle training program for you.