

# Introduction

Pelvic floor exercises are recommended as a way of improving bladder control. When done correctly, the exercises outlined in this guide can strengthen your pelvic floor muscles, which in turn can have a positive impact on your bladder and bowel control.

## What is the Pelvic Floor?

The pelvic floor consists of layers of muscle and ligaments that stretch from the pubic bone to the end of the backbone (coccyx) and from side to side (see diagram opposite). Firm, supportive pelvic floor muscles help support the bladder, womb and bowel, and to close the bladder outlet and back passage.

## How does the Pelvic Floor work?

The muscles of the pelvic floor are kept firm and slightly tense to stop leakage of urine from the bladder and wind or faeces from the bowel. When you pass water or have a bowel motion, the pelvic floor muscles relax. Afterwards, they tighten again to restore control. The muscles actively squeeze when you laugh, cough or sneeze to help prevent any leakage. They also have an important sexual function, helping to increase sexual awareness for both yourself and your partner during intercourse.

### Quick tip

Try and get into the habit of doing your exercises during normal day-to-day activity, like cleaning your teeth or waiting for a kettle to boil.

## Finding your Pelvic Floor Muscles

Finding your pelvic floor muscles can be a bit challenging. When you exercise them, there shouldn't be any visible sign that you're doing so 'on the outside'.

Things to watch out for are to not pull in your tummy excessively, not squeeze your legs together or tighten your buttocks, and to not hold your breath! Here's what you need to do:

Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart, or lay down. Now imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from the bowel. To do this, you need to squeeze the muscles around the back passage. Try squeezing and lifting that muscle as if you really do have wind. You should be able to feel the muscle move, but your buttocks and legs should not be moving at all. You should notice the skin around the back passage tightening and being pulled up and away from your chair. Really try to feel this squeezing and lifting.

Now, imagine that you are sitting on the toilet passing urine. Picture yourself trying to stop the stream of urine. You should be using the same group of muscles that you used before, but may find this exercise feels more difficult. Make sure however that you don't try and stop the stream when you are actually passing urine, as doing so could cause problems with correct emptying in future.

Next, try to tighten the muscles around your back passage, vagina and front passage, and lift up inside as if trying to stop passing both wind and urine at the same time. It's very easy to bring other incorrect muscles into play here, so try to isolate your pelvic floor as much as possible by not squeezing your legs together, not tightening your buttocks and not holding your breath. The lower tummy can be very gently drawn in as if pulling away from the zip of tight trousers. This way, most of the effort should be coming from the pelvic floor muscles.

# Your guide to Pelvic Floor Exercises

For women



## Practising your exercises

Now that you can find your pelvic floor muscles, it's time to put your effort into practise. We've listed 2 types of exercises below - slow contractions (Set one) and quick contractions (Set two).

We recommend you do a set of slow contractions followed by a set of quick contractions at least 3 times a day.

### Set one - slow contractions

The aim of this exercise is to give your pelvic floor muscles stamina. Either sit, stand or lie with your knees slightly apart. Slowly tighten and pull up the pelvic floor muscles, lifting and squeezing them for as long as you can. Rest for 4 seconds and then repeat. Build up your strength until you can do 10 slow contractions at a time, with a 10 second hold for each and 4 seconds of rest in between.

### Set two - quick contractions

This exercise aims to help your pelvic floor muscles react quickly to sudden stresses such as sneezing, coughing or laughing, that put pressure on the bladder. Assume the same position as slow contractions, but after drawing in the pelvic floor, hold it for just 1 second before relaxing. Quick contractions help achieve strong muscle tightening, so aim to build up to 10 quick contractions in succession.

### Quick tip

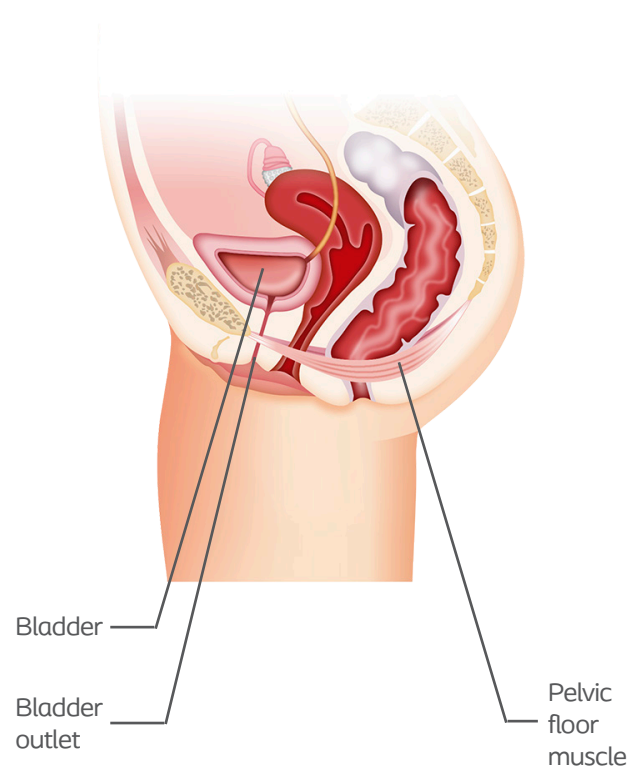
If you're unsure whether you're exercising the right muscles, put your thumb into the vagina and try the exercises. You should feel a gentle squeeze as the pelvic floor muscles contract.

Remember, it takes time to notice a difference in your pelvic muscle strength, so don't give up if you're not seeing instant results! You'll likely need to exercise regularly for at least 3 months before your muscles gain their full strength. Everyone is different too, so keep at it, and you will see results in time.

## How can exercising the Pelvic Floor muscles help?

Exercising the pelvic floor muscles can strengthen them so they give the correct support. This will improve your bladder control and improve or stop leakage of urine.

Like any other muscles in the body, the more you use and exercise them, the stronger the pelvic floor muscles will be.



## A few extra tips...

When it feels like you might be about to leak, tighten your pelvic floor muscles; pull the muscles up before you cough, laugh, sneeze or lift anything heavy to stop a leak in its tracks.

Don't forget the importance of drinking plenty of water - at least 6-8 glasses a day.

Don't get into the habit of going to the toilet 'just in case'. Only go if your bladder feels full.

Keep an eye on your weight, as extra weight can put a strain on pelvic floor muscles.

Once you've regained control of your bladder, continue to do your exercises a few times a day to keep the problem at bay.

Remember, no one knows you're exercising except you! You can do your exercises anywhere, anytime.

## If you have any questions...

This leaflet is designed to get you on the road to controlling your bladder, but if you're having trouble with the exercises or would like any further advice, don't hesitate to get in touch with your nurse, doctor or continence advisor.

