

Your Pelvic Floor

Where are my pelvic floor muscles?

Your pelvic floor muscles are attached to your pubic bone at the front, and to your tailbone (coccyx) at the back. They form a bowl of muscle in the base of your pelvis.

What is the function of my pelvic floor muscles?

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles that blend and work together to help

- reinforce closure of your bladder and bowel when you cough, sneeze, or exercise,
- support the pelvic organs
 - Bladder
 - Womb (uterus)
 - Back passage (bowel)
- enhance sensation during sexual intercourse

The pelvic floor muscles also work together with your deep abdominal muscles to help to stabilise your back, hips and pelvis when you move.

What can cause my pelvic floor muscle to become weak?

Your pelvic floor muscles can become weakened by pregnancy, childbirth, constipation, chronic cough, heavy lifting, menopause, gynaecological and abdominal surgery.

How do I know if my pelvic floor muscles are weak?

If your pelvic floor muscles are weak you may experience any of the following

- leaking from your bladder when you cough, sneeze or exercise
- an urgent or frequent need to empty your bladder
- difficulty controlling wind
- difficulty supporting a tampon
- reduced sensation during intercourse

How can I strengthen my pelvic floor muscles?

Just like all muscles, the pelvic floor muscles will strengthen with regular exercise. However, research has shown that it may take between 3-6 months to strengthen them effectively. The following is a general exercise regime, which follows national guidelines.

The more specific the programme is to your needs, the more effective it will be. For an individualised assessment and programme, make an appointment to see Sally our specialist Women's Health Physiotherapist.

How do I exercise my pelvic floor muscles?

- Start in sitting, with your legs uncrossed.
- Relax. Close your back passage as if trying to stop yourself passing wind.
- Now close your front passage by imagining you are stopping the flow from your bladder.
- Keep the back and front passage closed as you lift both passages, hold, and slowly release.

It is important to practise this exercise in lying, sitting and standing.

While exercising your pelvic floor muscles try to avoid

- squeezing your buttocks,
- holding your breath,
- pulling in your tummy,
- exercising with a full bladder

If you are exercising correctly no one around you will know.

**It is important that you do not practise this exercise while emptying your bladder.

Exercise regime as recommended by NHS guidelines

- Start the exercise described above, hold for 1 second before slowly releasing. Repeat, if possible, eight times, three times a day.
- As your strength improves you will be able to increase the hold to 2 seconds, and so on. Work towards a maximum hold of 10 seconds for each repetition.

Quick pelvic floor contractions will increase the reaction speed of your pelvic floor muscles. This will also help to protect against leaking when you cough, sneeze and exercise.

- Close back and front passages quickly, relax.
- Repeat ten times, once a day.

Helpful hints

Try to engage your pelvic floor muscles before any activity that causes you to leak from your bladder i.e. coughing, sneezing, lifting.

1. Drinking plenty of fluid (1.5 – 2 litres) will help to reduce your risk of constipation. Frequent straining to empty your bowels can stretch and weaken your pelvic floor muscles.
2. Exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet.
3. Try to maintain your recommended body weight.
4. Try to avoid smoking, the toxins produced by smoking can damage the elasticity of your body's tissues.