

Continence Program for Women

Pelvic Floor Exercises

Pelvic floor or Kegel exercises are done to strengthen the muscles that support the bladder, urethra, vagina, and rectum. Often the pelvic floor muscles are weak which contributes to the problems of losing urine. Weakness of the pelvic floor muscles can be caused by pregnancy, childbirth, heavy physical labour, repetitive coughing, and chronic straining to use the bowels. It takes time and effort to strengthen these muscles and it may take you several weeks until you see an improvement. The Pelvic floor muscles also weaken with age so you need to persevere and continue these exercises on as a lifelong process.

How to Identify the Correct Muscles

The pelvic floor is made up of a number of different muscles in layers. These muscles work together in a coordinated action together with your breathing pattern and the amount of pressure in your abdomen. To try to find them and learn how to contract them, close your eyes and think about the urethra or opening where the wee comes out. Try to think about very gently pulling up or "tweaking" the urethra as if pulling it upwards by a thread. Next try to imagine holding onto a tampon in the vagina. Think about trying to hold it in as someone is trying to pull it out, by using a gentle squeeze of the vaginal walls. Next try to pull up the anus, by imagining trying to prevent wind escaping from the back passage.

Doing the Exercises

There are two types of pelvic floor exercises you need to master. Firstly you need to learn how to do a gentle holding contraction that you can maintain as you move around through the day for ongoing pelvic floor support. You then also need to learn how to do some harder, maximal squeezing contractions to close off and resist pressure from above when you are sneezing, coughing, lifting etc.

1. Gentle Holding Contractions

Either in lying or upright sitting. Close your eyes and focus in on your normal relaxed breathing pattern. Feel when you breathe in, and then breathe out. When you are in tune with this in /out rhythm, try to then take add a short pause after the breath out, before taking the next breath in.

Now during the pause try to do a gentle contraction of your pelvic floor by thinking about either "tweaking" the urethra up, or squeezing the vagina around the tampon. Only do it momentarily, and then relax the muscles as you breathe back in. Practise this until you develop an awareness of these muscles working. Remember do NOT hold your breath in and do not try to pull up hard as you will recruit other muscles instead.

Next try to gently draw in the lower abdomen as you are lifting up the urethra and vagina.

When you can feel these little muscles, you then need to learn how to hold and maintain this type of gentle, light contraction. This time, breathe in, breathe out, pause and get the contraction switched on, then keep it turned on while you continue breathing in a nice easy fashion and try to hold the contraction for 5-10 secs. Gradually build up the time you can do this for.

Once you can hold a contraction for more than 10-15 secs then try to maintain it as you move around. Practise trying to move from sit to stand, and stand to sit with the contraction held on. Then try to walk around the room with the muscles gently turned on. You should still be able to move quite freely. If you can't then you may have them pulled up too hard. Remember it should only be only a light 5-10% effort. Gradually incorporate this into your everyday life, practice holding lightly as you walk, wait in queues, wait for the kettle to boil, at traffic lights etc.

2. Maximal Strength Contractions

Once you have mastered the gentle hold and have the right muscles working; now you can try more maximal effort contractions to strengthen the pelvic floor. Try to still use just the pelvic floor muscles and not the legs and buttocks as well.

Maximal Holds

Firstly try to do a maximal 100% effort contraction of the pelvic floor muscles, squeeze up as hard as you can, lifting the urethra and squeezing the vagina. Also squeeze up the anus as if stopping wind escaping. Now try to hold this contraction for at least 6 secs, then relax, have a few seconds rest, then repeat 6-8 times. Remember your breathing, do not hold your breath in as you squeeze. Try to do these harder squeezes twice a day.

Maximal Flicks or Bounces

Now try to activate the pelvic floor muscle hard in an on, off fashion, like turning a light switch on and off repeatedly, or imagining the pelvic floor as a trampoline with someone bouncing up then down on it. Keep flicking the muscle on and off in an upward direction. Count how many you can do until you feel the muscle gets tired. Remember your number and try to increase it by practising twice a day.

3. Correct Timing of the Contraction

It is important that the pelvic floor muscles are not only strong but that they come in and learn to contract at the appropriate time eg. a split second **before** you lift or cough and in the appropriate combination with other muscles. To practise the timing of the contraction start with a gentle activity like blowing your nose. Gently blow out through the nose into a tissue as you try to draw the low abdomen in and pelvic floor up simultaneously. Then try to do this just before you cough, sneeze or lift.

Posture

Always remember posture! Pelvic floor is more active when you sit tall, stand tall etc.

SUMMARY

1. Practice your gentle submaximal holding contraction often as you move around through the day.
2. Twice a day, morning and evening do your harder maximal squeezes and flicks or bounces. Slowly increase the number you are able to do.
3. Watch how you cough and sneeze. Look at your pattern use "the Knack" and try to draw the abdomen in and pelvic floor up as you cough, sneeze and lift.

These exercises cannot harm you in any way if done correctly, although you may feel some muscle soreness as you adjust to the new activity. It is highly recommended that you see the physiotherapist to check that are doing these exercises correctly, as research has shown that 30% of people doing pelvic floor exercises are doing them incorrectly. Perseverance is the key – Remember the saying "Use it or Lose it", this absolutely applies to pelvic floor.