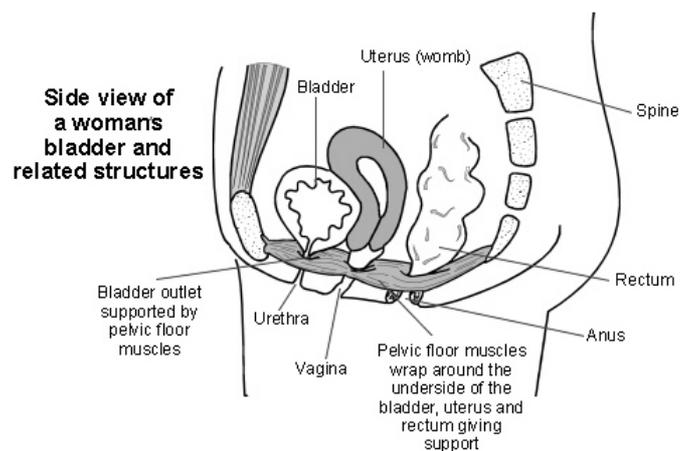




What's the big deal about the pelvic floor?

I have just turned 34ish and, having been through the year of the engagement parties and the year of the weddings when you wondered if you could possibly get to two on the same weekend, we have entered the year of the baby- if you're not pregnant then you're 'trying'. Suddenly my close friends and even my not-so-close friends are sidling up to me and asking whether pelvic floor exercises really are THAT important. Having had them ignore me about posture and sitting up straight for the last ten years I want to shout (louder than the music in the pub which I'm sure never use to be that loud), "YES! DO YOUR PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES! DO THEM NOW, TOMORROW, AND FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE!" You may ask yourself why - well hopefully this will give you some ideas.

The pelvic floor is a set of muscles that forms, as the name suggests, the floor of the pelvis. They act like a sling, running from front to back, supporting the uterus, bladder and bowel, and also helping to control the three openings; the urethra, vagina and back passage.



In pregnancy the muscles have to support the increasing weight of the baby and in labour they help turn the baby's head at delivery and stretch around the baby as it is born.

During pregnancy and after delivery you may notice that your pelvic floor muscles don't seem as strong as they once were. You may leak when you cough, laugh or sneeze, or you may have trouble holding on when you have a full bladder or bowel. You may have a feeling of heaviness underneath which may be worse at the end of the day. After the baby is born you may find that sex feels different or it may be less enjoyable. Any of these symptoms can be caused by weakness in the pelvic floor muscles and all of them can be helped by improving the strength of the pelvic floor muscles.

How to do pelvic floor exercises

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing urine or wind. Squeeze and lift the pelvic floor muscles. You should feel all three openings closing and drawing upwards. You may not feel much happening at all to start with but keep trying. Hold the squeeze for a few seconds and then release. Do not hold your breath! Try not to squeeze your buttocks or thigh muscles, just the muscles between your legs. You may feel your tummy muscles tighten a little and that is fine.

Gradually increase the hold time to a maximum of 10 seconds. Release and repeat, up to a maximum of 10 times. Remember to release completely before you try to pull up again. Take your time. Try exercising in different positions and try to build up a routine each day.

These types of exercises where you hold the contraction for a few seconds help to increase the resting tone of the muscle. This helps improve the upwards support for the pelvic organs, keeping them in the right place within the pelvis, and it also improves the tone and sensation within the vagina which is important for a good sex life.

You must also be able to pull up and release the pelvic floor muscles quickly to enable them to respond if you cough, laugh or sneeze to prevent you leaking. Tighten and release them as strongly as you can and build this up to 10 times at each session. Again, allow the muscle enough time to let go completely before you pull up again.

To be effective both types of exercise need to be done at least 3 times a day. It doesn't matter if you can't manage 10 repetitions of each contraction; the important thing is that the muscle feels tired at the end of each exercise session so that gradually it will begin to strengthen. After giving birth you can start pelvic exercises as soon as you feel able and not too sore. It can take 12 – 20 weeks of daily exercises to build the muscle strength up, so persevere! Don't worry if you find it difficult to find time. These exercises can be done any where. Whilst cleaning your teeth, feeding the baby, or waiting for the kettle to boil!

"But I had a Caesarean so my pelvic floor should be ok and I don't have to do pelvic floor exercises." NO NO NO! Just having the extra weight of the baby and the placenta and fluid is enough to put a strain on and weaken the pelvic floor. Also, pelvic floor exercise help to activate the deeper abdominal muscles and this will help the muscles that were cut during the C-section to knit back together and strengthen.

It is very common to have any of the above symptoms immediately after having had a baby, but if a problem is persisting beyond 12 weeks post natal it is wise to seek help. You may need a more specifically tailored programme of exercises to make them more effective or you may need some advice to help with any persistent discomfort or lack of sensation.

Do you need more help?

- Do you worry about leaking when you laugh?
- Do you cross your legs when you sneeze, cough or exercise?
- Do you know the location of every bathroom in your environment?
- Do you go to the toilet more than 9 times a day or more than once at night?
- Do you often have a strong urge to void and have to race to the toilet?
- Do you avoid trampolines and skipping ropes with your children?
- Do you go to the toilet 'just in case'?

If you have had these problems longer term you can speak to your GP who might be able to refer you to a Physiotherapist on the NHS or you can seek help privately with a Chartered Physiotherapist who specialises in treating post-natal problems.

Now that I have your attention, I feel that there are lots of personal problems that women seem embarrassed to talk about. I think this is wrong. It amazes me the number of clients who, once they get to know me, confess like it is a dark secret that they don't like to be too far away from the nearest toilet and that they always go just in case. Let's start to be open about the effects, good and bad, that pregnancy, life and age have on us. Whether it's the fact that you really don't fancy sex having given birth or the fact that you don't like to be too far away from the nearest loo, let's start talking about it. You may even be surprised how many of your friends are feeling the same and how much help is out there.

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