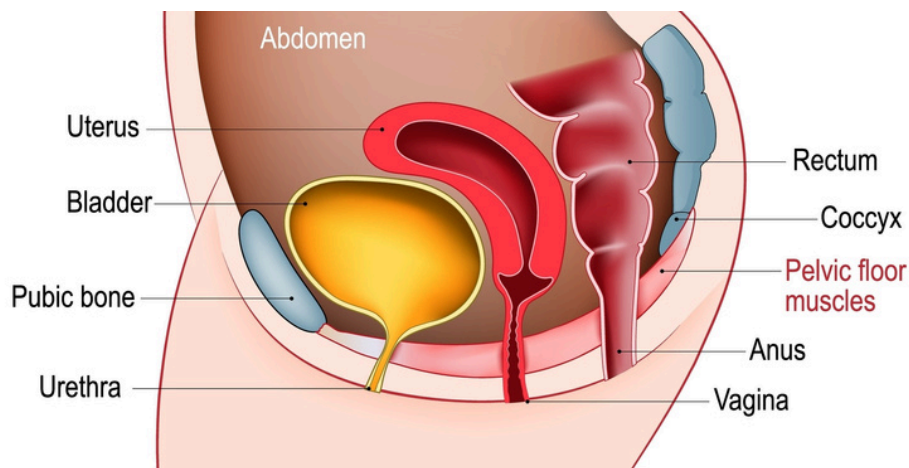


# Looking after your bladder, bowel and pelvic floor during pregnancy

The pelvic floor is a 'hammock' of muscles, underneath your pelvis. The muscles attach at the front of the pelvis to the pubic bone and span backwards to attach at the base of the spine around the sacrum and coccyx (tailbone). The opening of the bladder, birth canal (vagina), and the anus (exit from the bowel) are all supported by and pass through the pelvic floor.

## **The pelvic floor muscles should:**

- Support the bladder, uterus (womb), and bowel.
- Close the urethra (the tube to your bladder) to help prevent leakage of urine (wee).
- Close the anus to prevent leakage of faeces (stool).
- Relax to allow urine and stool to pass when you want them to (when you are on the toilet).
- Help with pleasure during sexual intercourse.



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Regularly doing pelvic floor exercises will help keep your pelvic floor strong. This is important because a weak pelvic floor may result in reduced bladder control, which can lead to urine leakage (urine incontinence) when you cough or sneeze (this is known as stress urinary incontinence). If your pelvic floor is weak, you may also need to go to the toilet more frequently and more urgently than normal.

Weak pelvic floor muscles may not support the pelvic organs. This can contribute to prolapse (dropping of the uterus, bladder or bowel).

During pregnancy, pressure on your pelvic floor muscles increases, as your womb and baby get bigger and weigh more. Whilst these muscles should stretch, they may also weaken and work less well. Therefore, it is important that you do pelvic floor exercises during pregnancy.

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## Am I likely to experience incontinence during my pregnancy

Some women experience urinary incontinence during pregnancy. It does not happen to everyone, but it can happen at any stage. However, it is more likely during the 3rd trimester, due to the increasing weight of your baby. Incontinence may continue after your baby's birth.

## Tips to prevent problems:

It is always better to try to prevent pelvic floor problems that may lead to incontinence. Therefore:

- Try to drink about 1.5 – 2 litres of water-based fluid a day (6–8 drinks).
- Try to avoid drinks that can irritate the bladder. Drinks that contain caffeine, including tea & coffee, cola, many energy drinks, green tea and fizzy drinks are bladder irritants. Instead, try water, decaffeinated coffee and tea, herbal teas, and diluted fruit juice or weak squashes.
- Try to avoid becoming constipated, as this can cause additional pressure on your pelvic floor muscles. Maintain good bowel health by eating a variety of fruit and vegetables as well as wholegrain foods each day.
- Always tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you lift anything heavy, and before you cough or sneeze.
- If you think you may have a urinary infection, speak to your midwife or GP.

Speak to your midwife or GP if you are experiencing any bladder or bowel difficulties or have any concerns. Don't suffer in silence.

## Pelvic floor exercises

Get into the habit of undertaking pelvic floor exercises regularly, ideally three times a day. Start exercising your pelvic floor muscles as soon as you can, as this can help to improve and even prevent incontinence. Continue with the exercises describe below after you have had your baby and throughout life to prevent problems as you get older.

It may be easiest to do the exercises while lying down to start with, but you can progress to doing them when sitting or standing. To help you remember, link them to something you do regularly such as brushing your teeth, putting the kettle on, or every time the adverts appear on the TV.

There are two sets of exercises suggested – holding on exercises (endurance or slow exercises) and short squeezes (quick exercises). Try to do both.

**General Tips:** *It is important to make sure you do the exercises correctly.*

- **Don't** try to exercise your pelvic floor muscles by stopping the flow of urine when you are emptying your bladder. Doing this frequently can contribute to bladder infection in some women.
- **Don't** pull in your stomach excessively or hold your breath.
- **Don't** tighten your buttocks or squeeze your legs together: the muscles in your buttocks and thighs should stay relaxed.

## Holding on exercises:

Tighten the muscles around the back passage as if you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind. While holding this squeeze, also tighten around your vagina and urethra as if you are trying to stop yourself from passing urine.

The feeling should be one of squeezing and lifting.

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Try to build up to holding for 10 seconds and then relax. It is important to try to feel the muscle relax. Aim to repeat this exercise as many times as you can, gradually building up to a maximum of 10 times.

Rest between each squeeze for the same length of time you were able to hold it for. Aim to do these exercises at least 3 times a day.

Do not do so many that your muscles begin to ache. It is quality, not quantity, that will help strengthen your pelvic floor.

## **Quick Squeezes:**

Do the same as you did for the holding exercises, but do them as quickly and as hard as you can, then let go completely. Rest for a second and then repeat. Aim to build up to 10 in a row.

With practice, you should be able to exercise in any position.

You should continue to practice your pelvic floor muscle exercises and remember these are 'forever exercises'. They will help to look after your pelvic floor throughout your life.

## **For further help**

Speak to your GP or midwife for more information or if you have any concerns.

We recommend this helpful video: [Pelvic floor exercises during and after pregnancy](#).

Download the [NHS squeeze app](#), from the Apple store or Google Play. This app will provide you with a tailored pelvic floor exercise plan, visual guides, and allow you to set reminders for when to complete your exercises.

Find more information about bladder and bowel health in our information library at [www.bbuk.org.uk](http://www.bbuk.org.uk). You can also contact the [Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline \(0161 214 4591\)](#).

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