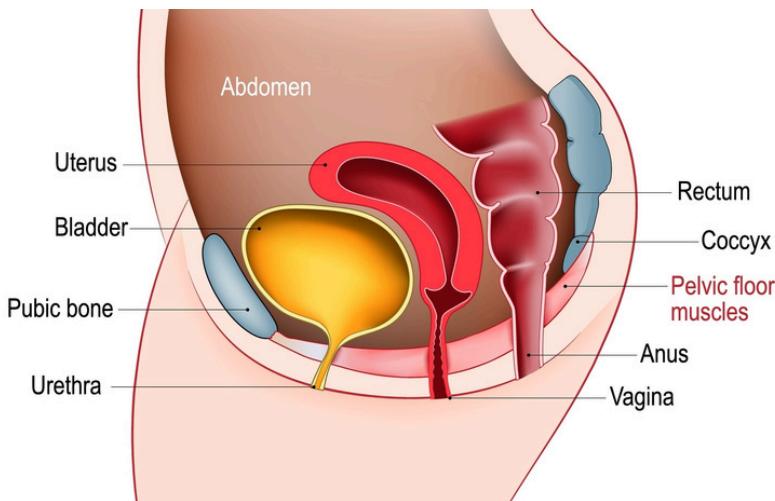


What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles and ligaments that forms a supportive sling at the base of the pelvis, stretching from the pubic bone at the front to the coccyx (tailbone) at the back. It supports the bladder, bowel, and uterus (womb), controls bladder and bowel function, and plays a role in sexual function. A healthy pelvic floor helps prevent incontinence (bladder and bowel leaks) and can be strengthened with exercises.



Function and importance of the pelvic floor

The pelvic floor muscles are essential for several key functions:

- **Organ Support:** They hold the pelvic organs—bladder, uterus (womb), and bowel—in place and protect them.
- **Continence:** They wrap around the urethra, vagina, and anus. Contracting these muscles helps control the release of urine, faeces, and gas (particularly when coughing, sneezing and exercising), and relaxing them allows for easy emptying.
- **Core Stability:** They work with abdominal and back muscles to support the spine and control pressure in the abdomen.
- **Sexual Function:** Strong pelvic floor muscles contribute to sexual sensation, arousal, and orgasm.
- **Pregnancy/Childbirth:** During pregnancy, they support the weight of the growing foetus (baby), and they need to be strong yet flexible enough to relax during delivery.

Weakness and Dysfunction

Weakness or dysfunction of the pelvic floor muscles is a common issue that can be caused by pregnancy, the weight of the baby, childbirth, aging, obesity, chronic constipation, heavy lifting, or ongoing coughing.

Symptoms of a weak pelvic floor include:

- Leaking urine (incontinence) when coughing, sneezing, laughing, or exercising.
- A sudden and urgent need to urinate.
- Leaking faeces or wind.
- A feeling of a bulge in the vagina or a dragging sensation (pelvic organ prolapse).
- Decreased sensation during sexual intercourse.
- The muscles can also become too tight (hypertonic), which can lead to difficulty emptying the bladder/bowel, pelvic pain, or painful sex.

Maintenance and Exercise

Regular pelvic floor exercises are recommended for all women throughout their lives to help prevent or manage these issues.

How to perform a basic exercise:

- **Find the muscles:** Sit, stand, or lie comfortably with your feet and knees slightly apart. Imagine you are trying to stop the flow of urine or prevent passing wind. You should feel the muscles lift up and in.
- **Squeeze and lift:** Tighten (contract) these muscles and hold the contraction for 3 to 10 seconds, depending on your strength. Breathe normally while you do this. Avoid tightening your buttocks, stomach, or thighs.
- **Relax:** Release and relax completely for the same amount of time as the squeeze.
- **Repeat:** Aim for 10 long squeezes and 10 quick, short squeezes, three times a day. The long squeeze is like endurance training providing support for longer and the short squeeze is sprint training (quick and fast) for when you cough or sneeze. You are aiming to increase the number of contractions and the length of time you can hold them.

One of the most difficult things is remembering to do the exercises, so try linking them to something that you do regularly, making a hot drink, cleaning your teeth, every time the adverts come on the television or at the traffic lights!

Consistency is key, and it may take several weeks to notice improvement. If you feel no improvement by 3-6 months or if you are unsure if you are doing the exercises correctly, a women's health physiotherapist can provide guidance. You can find a physiotherapist on this website <https://thepogp.co.uk/patients/physiotherapists>

Try contracting your pelvic floor before you lift something heavy, before you stand up or before you cough/sneeze.

Maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding constipation, and practising safe lifting techniques also help reduce strain on the pelvic floor.

Stopping the flow of urine to test your pelvic floor is not recommended as it can lead to urine infections if the bladder doesn't empty effectively or a lack of muscle co-ordination between the bladder and the pelvic floor muscles.

Other ways of exercising your pelvic floor

- **Electrical stimulation:** Sometimes a special electrical device is used to stimulate the pelvic floor muscles with the aim of making them contract and become stronger, when you are having difficulty contracting them yourself.
- **Biofeedback:** This is a technique to help you make sure that you exercise the correct muscles. For this, a physiotherapist or continence advisor inserts a small device into your vagina when you are doing the exercises. When you squeeze the right muscles, the device makes a noise (or some other signal such as a display on a computer screen) to let you know that you are squeezing the correct muscles. You can also get feedback from a sexual partner or by examining yourself.
- **Vaginal cones:** These are small plastic cones that you put inside your vagina for about 15 minutes, twice a day. The cones come in a set with different weights. At first, the lightest cone is used. You need to use your pelvic floor muscles to hold the cone in place and walk around continuing to do your normal activity. So, it helps you to exercise your pelvic floor muscles. Once you can hold on to the lightest one comfortably, you move up to the next weight, and so on.

- **Other devices:** There are various other devices that are sold to help with pelvic floor exercises. They all rely on placing the device inside the vagina with the aim of helping the pelvic muscles to exercise and squeeze.

There is little research evidence to show how well these devices work. It is best to get advice from a continence advisor or physiotherapist before using any.

The electrical stimulation, biofeedback, cones and other devices should all only be used on the advice of a continence nurse or specialist physiotherapist. They should be in addition to, not instead of, the standard pelvic floor exercises described above.

Further information

- [10 ways to stop leaks](#)
- [About Squeezy for Women](#)
- [Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists](#)
- [Pelvic Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy patient information](#)
- [Your pelvic floor leaflets](#)

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

For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.

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