

INFORMATION SHEET 17: VAGINAL CONES VS FEEDBACK EXERCISERS: MAKING A CHOICE

Two of the most common questions we are asked are:

- **Which is best – vaginal cones or feedback exercisers?**
- **Are vaginal cones and feedback exercisers equally easy to use?**

Manufacturers are always very positive about their own products, but there are pros and cons of each and there are no easy answers to these questions. The answers usually depends on a woman's existing symptoms and pelvic floor strength, what level of pelvic floor fitness she is aiming to achieve, and on lifestyle factors too.

Vaginal cones (sometimes also called weights) strengthen the pelvic floor muscles simply by their presence. They are used progressively over a period of weeks, starting with the lightest cone and building to the heaviest, and the presence of a cone in the vagina naturally causes a contraction of the pelvic muscles to hold the cone in place. Cones must be used standing up, as they rely on gravity to work.

Research shows that vaginal cones or weights will provide sufficient challenge to overcome stress incontinence for a very large number of women. So for women experiencing mild to moderate stress incontinence, who simply want to overcome or reduce their symptoms to more manageable levels, cones may be the answer.

Cones have the advantage that they can be used while undertaking normal day-to-day activities (at least once you've started to get used to them), with no need to set aside dedicated exercise time. Cones also have the advantage that they work to strengthen the pelvic floor without the need for "squeeze and lift" exercises, so are often the choice of women who are not sure whether they are able to contract their pelvic floor correctly, or who do not want to give the time to an exercise program.

One drawback of cones is that some women find them hard to position accurately, although the placement guide on the Vielle system helps to address this problem. Some cones, such as the Aquaflex Pelvic Floor Exercise System also require a degree of manual dexterity to swap the small weights between cones, but this does mean that the cones provide a very flexible progressive program.

A greater limitation may be that since the maximum weight in most cone sets is 50-55gm, there is also a limit on the "challenge" that cones present to the pelvic floor muscles. Women who are seeking a high level of pelvic floor fitness may find that they need more.

Feedback exercisers, or perineometers, work on the principle of providing visual feedback on the strength and duration of a pelvic floor contraction. They are most suitable for women who can already achieve a pelvic floor contraction, although they are usually so sensitive that even a minimal contraction "registers" on the gauge and provides reassurance that everything's "working" down there.

It is possible however to register a reading on the gauge of some perineometers through abdominal pressure, rather than through a pelvic floor contraction. Hence exercise technique is important, and users must ensure they adhere to instructions, especially when they first begin exercising with one. Every customer buying a perineometer from Pelvic Floor Exercise is provided with our Information Sheet 1: Using a perineometer, and this is also downloadable from our website at http://www.pelvicfloorexercise.com.au/information sheets/1_Perineometers.doc

Perineometers are also very useful in providing feedback on the speed and duration of a contraction. Many women who can achieve a strong contraction are surprised when the perineometer demonstrates how much time it takes to achieve the full contraction and even more surprised at how quickly the power of the contraction begins to fade, and how hard it is to hold.

Generally speaking, a perineometer, used in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, enables the user to achieve stronger muscles than is achieved using cones. This is an important consideration for women seeking solutions for incontinence problems other than mild stress incontinence. Women who want to improve their "grip" and their sexual response will also usually prefer a feedback exerciser.

All the perineometers we sell have adjustability and a read-out gauge that makes it impossible to "outgrow" them, and some have the added benefit of adjustable resistance through an air pump.

But the decision on which product to buy also depends on lifestyle factors too, since perineometers require dedicated exercise time, usually in the region of 15-20 mins a day.

Questions to ask yourself

- How severe are my symptoms?
- How much pelvic floor fitness do I want to achieve?
- Am I prepared - and able - to commit to the dedicated exercise time every day that a perineometer requires?
- Is there a time each day when I can be upright for 15-20 mins while I use cones?

If you are in any doubt about which products might suit you best, we encourage you to discuss your options with a **specialist women's health physiotherapist in your area**. A searchable database of Australian physiotherapists is available at: http://apa.advsol.com.au/physio_and_health/locate/find.cfm

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