

INFORMATION SHEET 18: THE PELVIC FLOOR AND HOW TO EXERCISE IT

What is the pelvic floor and what does it do?

The pelvic floor is a large hammock of muscles stretching from side to side across the floor of the pelvis. It is attached to your pubic bone in front, and to the the tail end of your spine behind. The openings from your bladder, your bowels and your womb all pass through your pelvic floor. The pelvic floor

- . supports your pelvic organs and the contents of your abdomen, especially when you are standing or exerting yourself.
- . supports your bladder to help it stay closed. It actively squeezes when you cough or sneeze to help avoid leaking.
- . is used to control wind and when "holding on" with your bowels.
- . helps to increase sexual awareness both for yourself and your partner during sexual intercourse.

What weakens the pelvic floor muscles?

Pelvic floor muscles weaken for similar reasons to other muscles in our bodies: natural ageing and inactivity. But pelvic floor muscles are also often weakened through hormonal changes in women's bodies, and through pregnancy and childbirth. Factors such as being overweight, ongoing constipation and a chronic cough can put extra pressure on the pelvic floor and pelvic surgery can also have damaging effects, particularly in men.

Why exercise the pelvic floor muscles?

A poorly toned, weak pelvic floor will not do its job properly. Women with weak pelvic floor muscles frequently experience incontinence and reduced sexual response. But research has shown that the pelvic floor responds to regular exercise. With regular exercise, it is possible for most women to reduce or completely overcome the symptoms of a weak pelvic floor muscles, no matter what their age. A pelvic floor exercise regime, introduced earlier in life, will also prevent many of the problems associated with a weak pelvic floor muscle emerging later. It is never too early or too late to begin to exercise the pelvic floor. Research has also shown that pelvic floor exercise can provide relief from chronic pelvic pain syndrome.

A woman with already badly weakened pelvic floor muscles may need the advice of a women's health physiotherapist or other health professional before embarking on an exercise program, but many women with mild symptoms prefer to try a simple exercise program for themselves initially.

Pelvic floor exercises are often also called **Kegel exercises**, after their originator, Dr Arnold Kegel and are widely promoted as the starting point for building pelvic floor strength. Any woman can try these exercises for herself. Be aware that if they are not done correctly, they can aggravate a problem. Follow the instructions over the page, but seek the advice of a health professional, such as your GP or a women's health physiotherapist, if you have doubts about your ability to do the exercises correctly. Alternatively, consider using a simple device such as the Pelvic Floor Educator (available from the **Pelvic Floor Exercise** product range), to teach yourself the correct exercise technique.

How to do unassisted pelvic floor exercises (kegel exercises)

Exercise 1: Tighten the muscles around your back passage, vagina and front passage and lift up inside as if trying to stop passing wind and urine at the same time. It is very easy to bring other, irrelevant muscles into play, so try to isolate your pelvic floor as much as possible by **not** pulling in your tummy, **not** squeezing your legs together, **not** tightening your buttocks and **not** holding your breath. The effort should be coming from the pelvic floor.

For how many seconds can you hold the pelvic floor tight? Try holding it as long and as hard as you can. Build up to a maximum of 10 seconds. Rest for 4 seconds and then repeat the contraction as many times as you can up to a maximum of 10 contractions.

Try to do these exercises in a slow and controlled way with a rest of 4 seconds between each muscle contraction. Practise your maximum number of held contractions (up to 10) about six times each day.

Exercise 2: The ability to work these muscles quickly helps them react to sudden stresses from coughing, laughing or exercise. Practise some quick contractions, drawing in the pelvic floor and holding for just one second before releasing the muscles. Do these steadily, aiming for a strong muscle tightening with each contraction up to a maximum of 10 times.

Try to do one set of slow contractions (exercise 1) followed by one set of quick contractions (exercise 2) six times each day.

If you do pelvic floor exercises regularly, you will see optimum results within 3 to 6 months, but you should continue them for life to fully protect your pelvic floor.

Leaflets on pelvic floor exercises are available for free from many sources including the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66.

How to achieve better results with your pelvic floor exercises

There is a growing amount of research showing many women achieve better results when they use pelvic floor exercise devices to assist them in doing pelvic floor exercises. Dr Kegel, the originator of the kegel exercise program, never intended his exercises to be conducted on an empty vagina. He developed an exercising product similar to the perineometers or feedback exercisers in use today. Somewhere along the line, his message has been lost and for many years women have been encouraged to try unassisted exercising.

For many women, this presents difficulties and they may be able to achieve better results with the assistance of a pelvic floor exercise or strengthening device. Many good pelvic floor exercisers have been available for sometime but are often hard to track down, particularly for women who want to exercise independently at home. **Pelvic Floor Exercise** brings together a range of the best devices available on the Australian market, to make choosing and buying easier. Contact us or visit our website to browse through our range.

Why are women sometimes unsuccessful in strengthening their pelvic floor?

Often because they don't exercise often enough, and for long enough. Women report that they don't remember, they find it hard to fit exercises into daily life, they feel uncertain about whether the exercises are working and whether they are doing them correctly, particularly in the early stages. The use of devices can help address these problems and encourage women to continue their pelvic floor fitness and strengthening regimes. Most importantly many women find that using pelvic floor exercise devices produce better results than unassisted exercising, so they are encouraged to keep going.

The material presented in this information sheet is intended as an information source only. The information is provided solely on the basis that readers will be responsible for making their own assessment of the matters presented herein and are advised to verify all relevant representations, statements and information. The information should not be considered complete and should not be used in place of the advice of a health care provider. Pelvic Floor Exercise does not accept liability to any person for the information or advice provided in this sheet, or for loss or damages incurred as a result of reliance upon the material contained herein.