

INFORMATION SHEET 41: CHOOSING WISELY

We are often asked "What style of pelvic floor strengthening device would suit me best?" The answer 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.

This summary is designed to answer this question, but everyone's needs are different. If you are still unsure after reading this information sheet, we suggest you talk to your health practitioner to discuss your specific needs.

1. THE THREE MAIN TYPES OF EXERCISE AIDS AND WHAT THEY DO

1.1 Vaginal cones or weights sets (such as Aquaflex) consist of a series of cones of increasing weight, and provide sufficient challenge to beat stress incontinence for a very large number of women. They are often the most popular choice for **women who are experiencing mild stress incontinence, and who simply want to overcome or reduce their symptoms to more manageable levels.** They are recommended by the expert body, the International Consultation on Incontinence, as a first-line therapy for the treatment of stress incontinence.

- Cones 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. 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.
- Cones are used for 15-20 mins a day 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. Aquaflex cones are useable with any type of clothing, but the hard "tails" that provide useful exercise feedback on Vielle cones mean that they are harder to use whilst wearing underpants.
- Cones 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. The maximum weight in most cone sets is 50-55gm, so there is a limit on the "challenge" that cones present to the pelvic floor muscles. Women who are seeking a high level of pelvic floor fitness, beyond the level required to overcome their stress incontinence, may find that they need a feedback exerciser to achieve their goals.
- The Fourth International Consultation on Incontinence, Paris, July 2008 recommended vaginal cones for the treatment of stress incontinence, with the proviso that they did not add benefit to pelvic floor exercises. They are therefore useful as a stand-alone alternative for women who do not exercise.
- Cones or weights are not suitable for women who have a prolapse as the prolapse can preclude the correct positioning of the cone.

1.2 Feedback perineometers (such as PFX2, Pelvexiser, PFXA, which work via air pressure and the Peritone, which is powered by a 9v battery) consist of a vaginal (or anal) sensor attached to a device that incorporates a read-out gauge. When the user contracts her pelvic floor, with the sensor in place, the strength, speed and duration of the contraction is demonstrated on the gauge. **They are most suitable for women who can already achieve a pelvic floor contraction (even if it's a weak or very short one) and who want to build up muscle strength and tone.** The PFX2 and Peritone in particular are so sensitive that even a minimal weak contraction "registers" so they are the best choice for beginners.

- Since it is possible to register a reading on the gauge of an air pressure perineometer through abdominal pressure, rather than through a pelvic floor contraction, exercise technique is important, and users must ensure they adhere to instructions, especially when they first begin exercising. Every customer buying a perineometer from Pelvic Floor Exercise is provided with our Information Sheet 1: Using a perineometer.
- Even 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, a perineometer enables the user to achieve stronger muscles than is achieved using cones. This is important for women seeking solutions for problems other than mild stress incontinence, or women who are seeking to prevent pelvic floor weakness from developing. Women who want to improve their "grip" and their sexual response will also usually prefer a feedback exerciser.
- All our perineometer have a wide range of reading capacity, making it almost impossible to "outgrow" them. Perineometers require dedicated exercise time, usually in the region of 15-20 mins a day.

Our simplest feedback device, the Pelvic Floor Educator, doesn't provide a read-out gauge, but simply gives feedback on correct technique via an indicator stick.

1.3 Electrical stimulation devices (Pericalm) are generally used to stimulate muscles or nerves that are not currently able to respond optimally. They are often recommended for use by women who are unable to contract their pelvic floor muscles at all, or who are only able to achieve a weak contraction. They can be used on their own as a starting point for strengthening the pelvic floor, or in conjunction with weights or feedback devices as part of an exercise program.

- Our ES devices use the frequencies that are known to help to overcome stress and urge incontinence, and the Pericalm has pre-set programs for other problems too.
- They are used with vaginal (or anal) electrodes, attached by wires to the stimulation device. The Athena operates wirelessly. The electrodes are used internally and the user has complete control over the intensity of the stimulation. Manufacturers recommend ES devices are used for between 15 and 45 mins per day (depending on device and program), and since the placement of the electrode is important (to ensure it is in contact with the correct muscle area), they must generally be used in a still position.
- Although the concept of electrical stimulation can be daunting, both the Pericalm and the Athena are user-friendly, with pre-set frequencies and easy-to-use controls.

2. PRODUCT COMPARISONS

The following comparison table will help you to compare the features and primary purpose of different products in our range.

EXERCISE AID COMPARISON TABLE		
<p><u>Provides visual feedback</u> Pelvic Floor Educator Isis (ltd) Pelvexiser Juno (ltd) Vielle PFX2</p>	<p><u>Needs dedicated exercise time</u> Pelvic Floor Educator Pelvic toner Pericalm Peritone PFX2 Pelvexiser Isis Juno</p>	<p><u>Suitable for beginner users</u> Pelvic Floor Educator Smartballs Peritone Luna Beads Isis Juno Pelvexiser PFX2 Pericalm Vielle Aquaflex Pelvic Toner</p>
<p><u>Adjustable resistance</u> Aquaflex (adjustable weights) Vielle (progressive weights) Pelvexiser PFX2 Pelvic Toner</p>	<p><u>Contractions against resistance</u> Energie Pelvic Floor Educator Pelvexiser Pelvic Toner PFX2 Peritone Luna Beads Isis Juno</p>	<p><u>Suitable for advanced users</u> Pelvexiser PFX2 Energie Peritone</p>
<p><u>For women with faecal incontinence</u> PFXA Pericalm (used with Anuform) Peritone (used with Anuform)</p>	<p><u>Use while moving around</u> Aquaflex Smartballs Vielle Luna Beads</p>	<p><u>Readable dial or display feedback</u> Pelvexiser Peritone PFX2 PFXA</p>
<p><u>Strengthens the pelvic floor without the need to do the "squeeze and lift" exercises</u> Aquaflex Vielle Pericalm Luna Beads</p>	<p><u>Use while laying/standing still</u> Pelvexiser Pelvic Floor Educator PFX2 Pericalm Peritone Pelvic Toner Isis Juno</p>	<p><u>Can be fully inserted</u> Aquaflex Smartballs Energie Vielle Luna Beads</p>

Products suitable for men: PFXA, Orgawell Pelvic Floor Exercise DVD, Pericalm (used with Anuform or Contract Control anal electrode) Peritone (used with Anuform)

3. MAKING THE RIGHT DECISION FOR YOU

The decision about which type of device might suit you therefore depends on your answers to questions such as these:

- What symptoms do I have and how severe are they?
- Can I already contract my pelvic floor muscles at all?
- How much pelvic floor fitness do I want to achieve?
- How much time am I able to give to pelvic floor strengthening each day?
- If I want to use cones, can I ensure I am upright for the required 15-20 mins every day?

This information may help you to make a choice, but we also encourage you to discuss your options with a **specialist women's health physiotherapist in your area**. The APA may be able to suggest a suitable practitioner in your area; call them on 1300 306622. Or you can call the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66 to find a continence practitioner in your locality.

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.