



## Fact sheet About pelvic floor muscles

**Whether you are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or have had a baby, it is important to remember to do your pelvic floor muscle exercises and your tummy bracing exercises. This will help to keep your muscles strong if you are pregnant and help them to recover more quickly after your baby has been born. All women should do pelvic floor exercises, even once they have returned to normal after pregnancy.**

### Your pelvic floor muscles are important!

Freda (not her real name), would like to share her story to let you know how important pelvic floor muscle exercises are, and to encourage you to take note now. It is never too late to get help, but it is easier to stop a problem from happening in the first place.

Freda has three children, and had her first baby when she was 22 years old. She was 26 when she had her second baby and then in her late 30s for her third. This is when the problems started, or became apparent.

Freda visited the physiotherapist, not sure if she was doing her pelvic floor muscle exercises correctly. She experienced incontinence (leakage of urine) when she coughed and also on the way to the toilet – not always making it when she needed to go. This had been happening for a few months. She had been thinking, “hopefully this will get better”, but it didn’t, and it was very upsetting. She was brave enough to mention it to her doctor, who suggested physiotherapy but also surgery if physiotherapy didn’t help.

“It was very embarrassing to come to a physiotherapist when I actually had a problem, but it was a relief to get some help, and to know that I could improve the situation. But if I had known years ago how important the exercises were, I wouldn’t be putting up with this now at the age of 38. It is devastating to wet yourself, and it has affected my relationship. The muscles are so weak that sex feels like a canyon. I feel very sloppy inside.

I wish I had known earlier when I had my first two children, but no one told me. I only got a brochure given to me after my second baby but I didn’t know how important the exercises were. I didn’t think I had a problem with my pelvic floor muscles back then, and I didn’t think it was important for me to do the exercises.

It would have been easier to keep my muscles working when I was younger. It is such hard work to get the muscles back into working order now, after years of not doing the exercises. But it is still worth doing now.”

With the help of her physiotherapist, Freda’s problem slowly improved and she regained control over her bladder and pelvic floor muscles. But she felt strongly enough to share her story in the hope that other women would not neglect their muscles and will enjoy the benefit of all of the information and physiotherapy advice that is available now.

### How NOT to do your pelvic floor exercises!

Over the years many women have become more aware of their pelvic floor muscles and of the need to do pelvic floor exercises – to keep these muscles strong and working correctly. But also over the years there has been a lot of incorrect information about pelvic floor exercises, and some women still are confused or unsure if they are doing their exercises correctly.

Some of the ways NOT to do your exercises include:

- **Stopping and starting your flow of urine every time you go to the toilet**

This is a good check to see that you can do it and to feel the muscles working. If you are just learning how to do the exercises it can help you to contract the right muscles. Doing this as a check before your baby is born, and also sometime after, can help you to make sure that this action of the muscle is working well. But it does not mean that your muscles are completely back to normal if you can do this, as the muscles work in other ways too (like holding on if you need to go to the toilet, supporting our pelvic organs and tightening when we cough, sneeze, laugh, run or jump).

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- **Tightening your muscles quickly and relaxing and doing hundreds of these per day**

This is OK to do as an exercise, but it is not the only way that the muscles should be worked. Some people mistakenly think that they are doing a great job of exercising their muscles this way, but it is also important to think quality, not quantity. The pelvic floor muscles should also be exercised by holding them, not just pulling them up quickly and relaxing them straight away. And you don't have to do a 100 per day!

- **Lying on the floor and lifting your pelvis and hips up and down, while flattening your back against the floor**

This exercise is called the pelvic tilting exercise, and does NOT exercise the pelvic floor muscles (unless of course you deliberately tighten your muscles at the same time, which can be quite tricky to do). Some women still think that this is what pelvic floor exercises involve and that they need to get on the floor to do them. Pelvic floor exercises can be done in sitting or lying, and standing, positions if you are able to do them well. However, they do not involve moving your pelvis at all, except for when you are trying to get yourself in the right position to start with. Then your pelvis should not move, while your pelvic floor muscles squeeze and lift up inside your pelvis.

Pelvic tilting exercises are good for back mobility, but after you are between 12–19 weeks pregnant it is not recommended that you continue to exercise while lying on your back. They can then be done in a hands and knees position as a back stretch (also called the 'cat curl'). A pelvic tilt can also be a good exercise to help start your tummy muscles to work again after your baby has been born, in addition to your post natal abdominal bracing exercises. But again remember, this is NOT an exercise for your pelvic floor.

- **Sitting to do the exercises and your body moves up and down**

If you are tightening your bottom muscles as well as or instead of your pelvic floor muscles, you will notice that your body moves quite a bit when you try to do the exercise, especially if you are sitting. This is incorrect, and does not work the pelvic floor muscles effectively. If you are tightening your bottom instead of your pelvic floor muscles, you will often feel more, but it means that your pelvic floor muscles are not working, so you won't get the desired results from doing the exercises this way.

If you are tightening your bottom as well as your pelvic floor muscles, again you will probably feel like you are doing more, but all your extra effort is going into your bottom, not into improving or maintaining the strength of your pelvic floor muscles.

Focus more on the pelvic floor muscles on the inside, and try to keep your bottom relaxed as you do the exercise.

- **Squeezing your legs together**

This may help if you have an urgent need to go to the toilet. However, if you do need to do this, it is a sign that your pelvic floor muscles are not working as well as they should. Squeezing your legs together means you are working your thighs instead of your pelvic floor muscles.

Often when the pelvic floor muscles are weak or getting tired, the leg and bottom muscles will work. If you cannot stop this from happening it is a good idea to seek some extra advice and a check from a continence and women's health physiotherapist, or your midwife.

- **Holding your breath when you tighten your muscles**

Often when you are first learning how to do the exercises, and you need to concentrate very hard, you will hold your breath. As you get better at doing the exercises, then you should learn to be able to tighten them, and to breathe at the same time. This may take several weeks or even a month or two to be able to master this.

- **Tightening your tummy really hard**

Although it is OK for your lower abdominal muscles (the area below your belly button) to tighten, you should not feel your whole abdominal wall tighten and pull in. If you feel the area under your rib cage really pulling in then you are probably trying too hard, or tightening your tummy instead of your pelvic floor muscles. Focus lower down in your vaginal area as you try to contract your pelvic floor muscles.

You will still read in some books, magazines and brochures that you shouldn't tighten your tummy muscles at all when you do your pelvic floor muscle exercises. The latest research by physiotherapists in Australia shows that it is OK for the lower tummy muscles to work when you tighten your pelvic floor muscles, and in fact this should happen. It is normal – your pelvic floor and lower tummy muscles actually do work together. To start with, this may not happen, but as you get better at both your pelvic floor and abdominal bracing exercises, this should get easier.

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## How to correctly tighten your pelvic floor muscles

- Sit tall and lean slightly forwards
- Focus on the pelvic floor muscles
- Relax the thigh, bottom and tummy muscles
- Breathe out and gently tighten around your front passage
- Breathe normally
- Identify the muscles and relax
- Breathe out and gently tighten around your back passage
- Breathe normally
- Identify the muscles and relax
- Draw up the front part of the vaginal wall
- Feel a lift in the muscles
- Feel the front and back passages working
- Focus more on the front part of the pelvic floor

## Exercising your pelvic floor muscles

- Warm up with 3 quick lifts and let go
- When easy, hold the lift for longer (eg. 3 seconds up to 10 seconds)
- Breathe normally
- Repeat it up to 10 times
- Maintain correct technique
- Do the sequence three times a day. This is a very general suggestion that should be tailored to individual needs if you think your pelvic floor is weak.

Seek help if you cannot:

- Feel your muscles hold or relax
- Feel a definite 'lift and squeeze'
- Feel squeeze and breathe at the same time

Seek help if you cannot stop the flow of urine.

Seek help if you are not confident or are not making any progress.

**Please note:** Another sign of pelvic floor weakness or a stretched vaginal wall can be water leaking from the vagina when you get out of the swimming pool

Sometimes water can get trapped inside the vagina while you are swimming or exercising in the water. This is quite

common after having a baby, but it is not normal (ie. it shouldn't continue long term).

Continuing with pelvic floor exercises can help to tone the vaginal wall and assist it to return to its normal size. It has been stretched during the birth, so it does take some time, even months, to stop happening. Sometimes however, the vagina will remain stretched after having children, but you can still improve the tone of your pelvic floor muscles by exercising them, which can help to give more firmness inside.

Urine can also leak out if your pelvic floor muscles are not yet back to normal after the birth. If you are unsure whether or not it is urine or water, the approach is the same for both anyway.

You should do your pelvic floor muscle exercises if you are not already doing them, or continue to do them to help to strengthen your muscles to relieve the problem.

If the leakage does not go away, or you have been doing your exercises and it is still occurring, please seek advice from a continence and women's health physiotherapist. There is more specific advice and treatment available that can help you to get back to normal, so that this problem does not continue.

## Do you forget to do your exercises regularly?

If so, you could place dots in places that will remind you to do the exercises. For example, on the mirror, television, phone, computer, in the toilet (for after you have finished going, not during your flow), in your wallet, where you sit to feed your baby or toddler, or anywhere else that will remind you to tighten your pelvic floor and tummy muscles. Create a screen saver to remind you, perhaps in code, on your computer.

