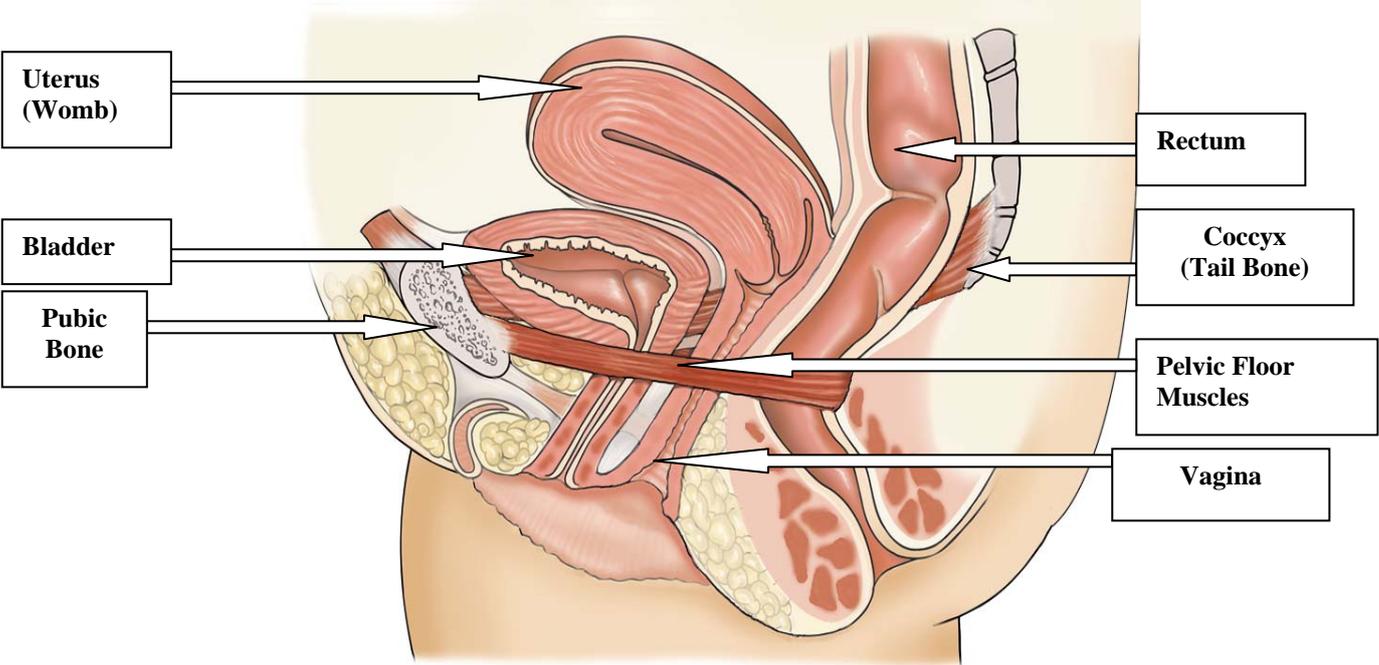


**Pelvic Floor Exercises for Women**  
**Physiotherapy Department –**  
**Continence Service**

**Introduction**

This leaflet tells you how to exercise and strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. These muscles form a broad sling running from front to back and as their name suggests, they form the floor of your pelvis.

Left side view of a woman's bladder and related structures



**Symptoms**

Your pelvic floor muscles need to be strong and firm. If they become weak, you might have leakage from your bladder or bowel when you cough, sneeze, laugh, exercise, lift or bend (*stress incontinence*). You might have a desperate need to empty your bladder or bowel (*urgency*) or you could sometimes fail to reach the toilet in time (*urge incontinence*). You might need to empty your bladder more than eight times each day (*frequency*).

Another problem could be the sensation of something coming down at the birth canal or back passage (*prolapse*).

Some women can also have loss of sexual sensation during intercourse.

## **Causes**

The pelvic floor muscles can become weak or damaged as a result of:-

- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Continual straining to empty the bowels
- Being overweight
- Frequent heavy lifting
- Menopausal changes
- Chronic cough
- Pelvic surgery
- Long periods of inactivity following injury or illness
- Lack of general fitness

## **The basic exercise**

Lie, sit or stand with your knees slightly apart. Tighten up your back passage as though you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind. At the same time tighten the muscles that you would use to stop yourself from passing urine. The feeling is one of “squeeze and lift” closing and drawing up the front and back passages.

This is called a “pelvic floor contraction”.

It is easy to use the wrong muscles instead of the pelvic floor muscles.

- Try not to clench your buttocks
- Try not to squeeze your legs together
- Try not to hold your breath

You may feel some tightening around your lower abdomen (bikini line) – this is normal.

## **There are a few ways you can check you are doing the exercises properly.**

- You can check with a mirror. Hold a small mirror so that you can see the area between your legs. Tighten the muscles. The skin between the anus and vagina should move away from the mirror.
- While sitting or lying you can put your hand on the area in between your vagina and back passage. You should feel movement away from your hand.
- While sitting or lying you can gently insert your thumb or index finger into your vagina. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles. You should feel the muscles move/tighten around your thumb/finger.
- During sexual intercourse, try to exercise your pelvic floor; your partner should be able to feel the muscles tightening.

It is very important to make sure you are using the right muscles; otherwise there may not be any improvement. You could even cause more damage. Ask for help if you are not sure that you are using the right muscles. A specialist continence physiotherapist or continence advisor can help you. See page 5 for details on how to contact the Continence Service.

## Your exercise programme

### Slow exercises

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles and hold them for as long as you can, up to a maximum of 10 seconds
- Relax fully for 4 seconds
- Now tighten again for the same time
- Relax fully for 4 seconds
- Repeat this until the muscles get tired

How many seconds can you hold for?  secs

How many times could you repeat it?  times

Eventually aim for a 10 second hold repeated 10 times.

### Fast exercises

- Quickly tighten up your pelvic floor muscles
- Hold for 1 second and then relax fully
- Repeat this until the muscles get tired

How many times can you do this in a row?  Eventually aim for at least 10 times.

**To strengthen the muscles it is necessary to repeat the slow and fast exercises at least 3 times each day. As your muscles get stronger gradually increase both the hold time in seconds and the number of repetitions. Try to build up to doing 10 slow exercises and 10 fast exercises at least 3 times each day.**

**Your exercise diary is on page 8 of this booklet.**

### Here are some tips to help you remember

Do your exercises:-

- After going to the toilet
- During programme breaks on TV
- If you are a new mum, whilst sitting feeding your baby
- Every time you have a drink

**To help prevent leakage of urine you should always tighten your pelvic floor muscles before and during coughing, sneezing, lifting or with any other activity which causes leakage.** This is also very important if you have symptoms of prolapse.

Remembering to perform these exercises can sometimes be difficult. If this is so for you, do not worry, it is never too late to start. It may take 3 to 6 months to notice a good improvement, but persevere, it will be worth it. Get help if there is no improvement in your bladder symptoms after 3 months. See page 5 for details on how to contact the Continence Service.

Once your pelvic floor muscles are strong, it is important to maintain them. Continue your exercises 2 to 3 times a day for the rest of your life. If you do not, then your muscles could become weak again.

### **Additional information**

Some questions answered which will help you to achieve your goal...

#### **Does my weight have anything to do with my problem?**

Getting down to your ideal weight will reduce the amount of strain placed on your pelvic floor muscles and can lead to a considerable improvement in your symptoms.

#### **Does drinking a lot of caffeine affect my symptoms?**

Caffeine can act as a stimulant to your bladder and is therefore best avoided or reduced. Caffeine is present in coffee, tea, chocolate, many fizzy drinks and some medication.

#### **I tend to be constipated on occasions and then my symptoms seem to be worse. Why?**

Straining to open the bowel stretches the pelvic floor muscles, which can weaken them. Check your diet to avoid this problem, or see your GP for advice. Ensuring adequate fluid intake can help (see below).

#### **I sometimes leak or feel something coming down when picking up heavy objects. Is there anything I can do to stop this happening?**

Lifting puts a strain on the pelvic floor. If you cannot avoid lifting a heavy object, remember to bend your knees first and then tighten your pelvic floor muscles; hold them tight (brace) until you have lowered the load.

#### **Are there any exercises I should avoid?**

Straight leg sit-ups and double leg lifts (lifting both legs up at the same time whilst keeping them straight) may put severe pressure on the pelvic floor (and the back) and should be avoided. Also avoid high impact activity, i.e. any activity involving both feet off the ground at the same time e.g. running, jumping.

#### **Remember:-**

**Liquid intake:** You should drink roughly 3 to 4 pints (1.5 to 2 litres) of liquid per day. Drinking less than this will not reduce your symptoms and it could make matters worse.

**Frequency of bladder emptying:** Try to avoid emptying your bladder too frequently as this can reduce its ability to hold urine. If you feel that you need to go more often than every 2 hours (frequency) then try to train your bladder to wait longer. When you feel the urge to empty your bladder soon after having done so, try these dealing techniques:-

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles
- Sit on something hard, e.g. the arm of a chair
- Distract your mind (for example, keep busy, make a phone call)

However, it is important to empty your bladder regularly through out the day (3 to 4 hourly) to avoid overstretching the bladder.

**Bladder emptying:** Do not crouch or hover over the toilet seat. It is important to sit down and completely empty your bladder, without straining, each time you go to the toilet. Urine left inside the bladder can irritate the bladder lining causing inflammation (which might aggravate symptoms).

It can help to:-

- Lean forward as you pass urine
- Or stand up, walk about for a few moments, then sit and try again.

**Your exercise diary**

Your might like to use the table below (for the first 12 weeks) to remind you to do your exercise at least 3 times a day. Tick the box each time you do your exercises.

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Week 1							
Week 2							
Week 3							
Week 4							
Week 5							
Week 6							
Week 7							
Week 8							
Week 9							
Week 10							
Week 11							
Week 12							

**Gwent Healthcare NHS Trust Continence Service**

Contact details: Telephone 01633 623794

**Acknowledgement**

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