

# PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLE EXERCISES FOR WOMEN

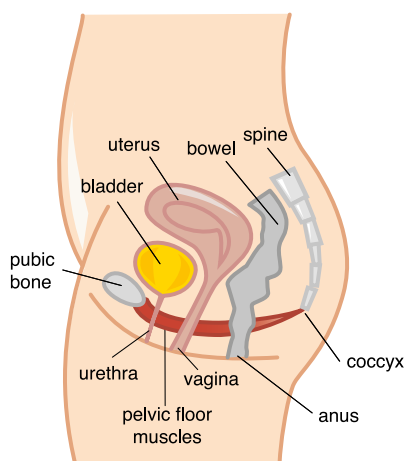
## Strong pelvic floor muscles mean good bladder control

### What are the pelvic floor muscles?

The pelvic floor is the base or the floor of the pelvis and is made up of layers of muscle and other tissues. These layers stretch like a hammock from the tailbone (coccyx) at the back, to the pubic bone at the front and from side to side.

A woman's pelvic floor muscles support her bladder, uterus (womb) and bowel. The urethra (urine tube), the vagina, and the anus (back passage) all pass through the pelvic floor muscles. Pelvic floor muscles help control your bladder and bowel. They may also help sexual function.

It is vital to have pelvic floor muscles that are strong and able to relax fully.



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Pelvic floor muscles can be made weaker by:

- ⇒ not keeping them active
- ⇒ being pregnant
- ⇒ giving birth
- ⇒ being menopausal
- ⇒ being constipated and straining.

### Should I do pelvic floor muscle exercises?

When the pelvic floor muscles have to support heavy loads they may not be strong enough.

Heavy loads press down on the pelvic floor muscles when you:

- ⇒ are pregnant
- ⇒ are overweight
- ⇒ push and strain to use your bowels if you are constipated
- ⇒ carry heavy weights
- ⇒ have a cough that goes on for a long time such as with asthma, bronchitis or a chronic cough.

Women who wet themselves leaking urine when they cough, sneeze or are active have stress incontinence. Pelvic floor muscle exercises can help improve this problem.

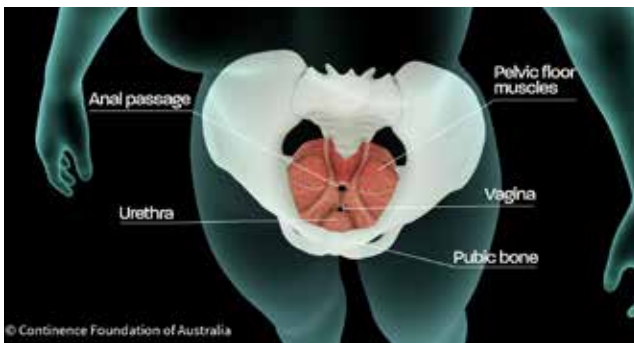
For pregnant women, pelvic floor muscle exercises will help the body support the growing baby. Pelvic floor muscle exercises will also reduce the chance of having a bladder or bowel problem after birth. Healthy muscles before the baby is born return to normal more easily after birth.



After the birth of your baby, begin pelvic floor muscle exercises within the first few days. Start gently to avoid any pain. Always brace your pelvic floor muscles. To brace means to squeeze in your pelvic floor muscles and hold before/as you cough, sneeze or lift the baby. This is called having 'the knack'.

As women grow older, the pelvic floor muscles need to stay strong. After menopause, hormone changes can affect bladder control. As well as this, the pelvic floor muscles change and may get weaker. Exercising your pelvic floor muscles can help lessen the effects of menopause on pelvic organ support and bladder control.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises may also help women who have an urgent need to pass urine often.



### Where are my pelvic floor muscles?

The first thing to do is to find out which muscles you need to exercise. Here are two things you can try:

1. Sit or lie down with the muscles of your thighs, bottom (buttocks) and stomach relaxed. Squeeze the ring of muscle around the anus (back passage) as if you are trying to stop passing wind. Now relax this muscle. Squeeze and let go a couple of times to be sure you have found the right muscles. Remember, do not squeeze your bottom.
2. Imagine trying to stop the stream of urine when sitting on the toilet after emptying your bladder. Then relax as if to start your stream again. You can do this to learn which muscles are the right ones to use. Your bladder may not empty the way it should if you stop and start your stream too often.

If you do not feel a distinct 'squeeze and lift' of your pelvic floor muscles when you try to squeeze, ask for help from a pelvic health physiotherapist or nurse

continence specialist. They will help you to get your pelvic floor muscles working the right way.

Even women with very weak pelvic floor muscles can be helped by pelvic floor muscle exercises.

### How do I exercise my pelvic floor muscles?

Now that you can feel the pelvic floor muscles working, you can:

- ⇒ lift and squeeze the muscles around your urethra (urine tube), vagina and anus (back passage) at the same time. Feel a sense of lift each time you squeeze your pelvic floor muscles. Hold them strong and tight as you count to eight. Then, let them go and relax. You should have a distinct feeling of letting go completely
- ⇒ repeat the lift, squeeze and letting go. It is best to rest for about eight seconds in between each lift up of the muscles. If you can't hold for the count of eight, just hold for as long as you can
- ⇒ If you cannot feel your muscles contracting, change your position and try again. The exercises can be done while sitting, lying or standing
- ⇒ repeat this lift and squeeze as many times as you can. Aim to do between eight to twelve squeezes each set
- ⇒ each day try to do three sets of eight to twelve squeezes each, with a rest in between
- ⇒ try to do sets while lying down, sitting or standing.

While doing pelvic floor muscle exercises:

- ⇒ do not hold your breath
- ⇒ lift and squeeze
- ⇒ do not tighten your bottom (buttocks)
- ⇒ keep your thighs relaxed.

## Women of all ages need to have strong pelvic floor muscles

### Exercise your pelvic floor muscles the right way

Fewer strong squeezes are better than a lot of half-hearted ones. Ask for help from your pelvic health physiotherapist or nurse continence specialist if you are not sure you are doing them right.

Seek help if you do not see any improvement in your symptoms or symptoms are getting worse after three weeks of doing regular pelvic floor exercises.

### Make the exercises part of your daily life

Once you have learnt how to exercise your pelvic floor muscles, do them as long as you can with the right technique. Every day is best. Make a regular time to do them. This might be after going to the toilet, when having a drink or lying in bed.

Other things you can do to help your pelvic floor muscles:

- ⇒ Use 'the knack'. This is when you brace your pelvic floor muscles by lifting, squeezing and holding each time before you cough, sneeze or lift anything
- ⇒ Always share the lifting of heavy loads
- ⇒ Avoid constipation

- ⇒ Eat two pieces of fruit and five serves of vegetables daily
- ⇒ Have fluids every day. Fluid is everything you drink. Fluid includes milk, juice and soup. The best fluid to drink is water
- ⇒ Don't strain when using your bowels or emptying your bladder
- ⇒ If you have hay fever, asthma or bronchitis see your doctor. Your doctor may help to ease sneezing and coughing
- ⇒ Keep your weight within the right range for your height and age.

### Call the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66 (free call)

Speak with a nurse continence specialist for free and confidential advice on resources, details for local continence services, products and financial assistance.

### For more information, you can also visit:

[continence.org.au](http://continence.org.au)  
[toiletmap.gov.au](http://toiletmap.gov.au)  
[health.gov.au/bladder-bowel](http://health.gov.au/bladder-bowel)

*This fact sheet is intended as a general overview only and is not a substitute for professional assessment and care.*

*This fact sheet is available in other languages from [continence.org.au](http://continence.org.au)*

