

Patient Information

Pelvic Floor Service Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

Introduction

This leaflet provides information about pelvic floor muscle exercises to improve your bowel control. The information is intended only for patients under the care of the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospitals Pelvic Floor Service. It may not cover everything you want to know so please ask if you need further advice.

What is the Pelvic Floor?

The pelvic floor is made up of different muscles that stretch like a hammock from your pubic bone at the front to your tailbone (coccyx) at the back. They also attach sideways to the bones of your pelvis which you can feel when you sit down.

The muscles have 3 main functions:

- Support the pelvic organs to prevent prolapse
- Maintain continence by supporting the rectum and bladder
- Support normal sexual function

Pelvic floor muscle problems may be linked with pregnancy and childbirth, menopause or the ageing process. Problems such as being overweight or chronic constipation can weaken the muscles. Certain medical conditions, especially those affecting muscle function such as spinal injury or neurological conditions may reduce our ability to control the muscles effectively.

Anal sphincters

The anal sphincters are two rings of muscle that wrap right around your anal canal (back passage).

- The internal sphincter works only by reflex so it is not under your conscious control. It is normally closed, only relaxing by reflex in response to pressure in your rectum. After evacuation it closes again to maintain continence. A weak internal sphincter can lead to passive leakage.
- The external sphincter encircles the internal sphincter and is made of muscle that you can squeeze at will. It snaps shut by reflex for example when you cough or laugh so you can maintain bowel control. You squeeze this muscle when you sense the urge to pass a stool

to enable you to make it to a toilet or defer till later. A weak external sphincter can lead to urgency and urge incontinence.

The sphincter muscles can become weakened or damaged by injury such as childbirth, chronic straining to evacuate your bowels, infection or surgery. Sometimes there is no obvious reason for weakness.

Bowel Function Problems

Weak or damaged sphincter muscles may not snap shut straight away after evacuation which makes it difficult to get clean and you may notice leakage after a bowel movement. Leakage can also happen during strenuous activities such as heavy lifting or when you walk any distance. Some people find that a small amount of stool is passed with wind or they have difficulty telling the difference between wind and stool.

Naturally people are very often reluctant to admit to bowel function problems because it is considered to be socially unacceptable and highly embarrassing. Even the fear of accidents can be very isolating and worrying.

Problems include:

- Difficulty controlling flatus (wind)
- Bowel urgency and urge incontinence
- Passive leakage onto underwear

Bowel control problems can be associated with:

- Chronic straining to evacuate
- Obstructed defaecation syndrome (ODS) - difficulty or incomplete evacuation which may also necessitate assisting evacuation by pressing around the anus, perineum (between vagina/scrotum and anus) or splinting the back of the vagina to prevent bulging (rectocele)

Sphincter exercises

Wait until 6 weeks after any pelvic floor surgery before doing pelvic floor muscle exercises.

Exercises are therefore focused on strengthening your external sphincter. This also helps to compress the internal sphincter to prevent passive leakage. You cannot exercise your internal sphincter as it is not under voluntary control. Speeding up the reaction time of the external sphincter may also improve your control of wind.

Like all muscles, the more you exercise your sphincter muscle the stronger it will become. This is a long process, requiring patience and dedication, often taking at least 3 months to be effective. Remember that over-zealous exercising can tire out your sphincter muscle and cause you to have more bowel control problems, especially at first.



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Learning how to exercise

- Sit comfortably
- Remember not to use your buttock or tummy muscles and **do not hold your breath.**
- Imagine you are trying to stop wind (flatus) escaping by squeezing the sphincter muscle around your back passage
- You should be able to feel your anus pulling in and up away from the chair like a lift. Really try to feel this and then relax completely. You are now exercising your anal sphincter.
- This time squeeze up again and now lift up at the front as if you are trying to stop passing urine.
- Relax completely. You will find this helpful if you have problems controlling urine
- Imagine your sphincter muscle like a lift. You are on the ground floor when you are relaxed.

Maximum Squeeze

- Squeeze again as tightly as you can without squeezing your buttocks to take the lift right up to the 4th (top) floor and straight back down to the ground floor. Relax completely
- Repeat 5-10 times
- This is a good squeeze to master for muscle strength when you are lifting something, sneezing or coughing.
- **I can do a Maximum Squeeze.....times**

Squeeze and Hold

- Now squeeze gently up to the 2nd floor for 5-20 seconds as you are able. Feel how much longer you can hold it compared to squeezing right up to the 4th floor. Remember not to hold your breath or squeeze your buttocks. Repeat 5 times

This is a good squeeze to practice if you have to rush to get to the toilet.

- **I can Squeeze and Hold forseconds**
- **I need to rest between squeezes forseconds**
- **I can repeat Squeeze and Hold.....times**

Try to practice these exercises 3 times a day. This will be easier lying down or standing at first. Pelvic muscle exercises are not a 'quick fix'. It is important that you continue with them even if they don't seem to be helping at first. Practice these exercises for 3-5 months and you should notice a gradual improvement. A simple diary may help you to keep a track of changes in your muscle performance.

Useful Tips

At first it is probably a good idea to set aside some time to exercise and really concentrate on getting them right. Quite soon they will become easy to do wherever you are. Nobody should be able to tell when you are exercising.

- Get into the habit of doing your exercises with the things you do often such as every time you touch water, after going to the loo or after every time you answer the phone....whatever you do often.
- If you are unsure that you are exercising the right muscle put a finger on your anus to check as you squeeze. You should feel a gentle lift and squeeze. Alternatively use a mirror to see how the anus puckers up as you squeeze.
- Use your muscles when you need them – pull up the muscles for example before you pick something up, cough or sneeze. Remember that you cannot hold your tightest squeeze for very long so use a gentler squeeze so you can hold on for longer. Don't panic, keep breathing. Your control will gradually improve.
- Watch your weight as extra weight puts more strain on your pelvic floor
- Continue your exercises even when you have regained bowel control. Continue to practice doing them a few times a day to ensure that the problem does not come back.
- When you empty your bowel completely there is less to leak. So take your time on the toilet and do some exercises before you wipe to contract your muscles. This may help to 'milk out' any residue.
- Try raising your feet on a low footstool about 20-30cm high (available from hardware shops) in front of the toilet to help open your pelvic floor so evacuation is more effective

Contact details for further information

Pelvic Floor Nurse Specialist

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital

Telephone: 01743 261083 (24hr answerphone)

Further information is available from;

- **The Pelvic Floor Society**

A national multi-professional body involved in supporting excellence in clinical practice, education and research, clinical standards, patient information and engagement in the commissioning of pelvic floor services.

Telephone: 020 7973 0307

Website: www.thepelvicfloorsociety.co.uk



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- **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

PALS will act on your behalf when handling patient and family concerns, they can also help you get support from other local or national agencies. PALS, is a confidential service.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Tel: 0800 783 0057 or 01743 261691

Princess Royal Hospital, Tel: 01952 282888

Other Sources of Information

- **NHS 111**

A fast and easy way to get the right help, whatever the time. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

Telephone: 111 (free from a landline or mobile)

Website: www.nhs.uk

- **Patient UK**

Provides leaflets on health and disease translated into 11 other languages as well as links to national support/self help groups and a directory of UK health websites.

Website: www.patient.info

- **Self-Help UK**

This is a directory of self-help groups and charities.

Website: www.selfhelp.org.uk

- **RADAR**

National key scheme for disabled toilet access

Telephone: 020 7250 8191

Website: www.disabilityrightsuk.org

- **Bladder and Bowel Foundation**

For more information about bladder and bowel conditions, treatment and support

Telephone: 0870 770 3246

Website: www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

Website: www.sath.nhs.uk

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