

Strengthen the pelvic floor muscles

Pelvic floor muscle training (PFMT)

Pelvic floor muscle strengthening (PFMS) or 'Kegel exercises' are a special type of exercise specifically targeted towards strengthening the pelvic floor muscles. This has been shown to help with all types of urinary incontinence but particularly stress incontinence.

Anyone with bladder problems, old, young, male or female, can benefit from pelvic floor muscle training (PFMT). PFMT basically involves contracting the muscles of the pelvic floor, which form a 'sling' between the pubic bone and the tailbone. If these muscles get weak or damaged, then they can't properly support the pelvic organs, which include the bladder and bowel.

Step 1. Locating the pelvic floor

The first step in strengthening them is to find them! To do this, imagine you need to pass wind but have to hold it in. The muscles you feel 'squeezing' around the anus are the rear of the pelvic floor muscles. Now imagine you need a wee but have to stop yourself going. The muscles you feel tightening to stop the flow of urine are the front end of the pelvic floor muscles.

Top tip: It sounds strange, I know, but you may find that sucking your thumb whilst pulling up your pelvic floor muscles helps you get a good contraction. Try it and see! It's fine to try to locate the pelvic floor muscles when you are actually on the loo, if you find this easier, but don't do this regularly, as you may irritate your bladder.

Step 2. Contracting the pelvic floor

To strengthen the muscles, start to 'pull up' the pelvic floor muscles from the back to the front. Contract the muscles slowly and hold the squeeze (aim to build up to 10 seconds), then relax for a few seconds before repeating. Aim for 5 pull ups to begin with, and gradually increase to 8-12 repetitions. Don't hold your breath while you are doing these exercises!

Next, pull the muscles up quickly and tightly, and then relax them immediately. So the same movement, but much faster. Again, start with doing these 5 times and increase the number gradually (up to 8-12 times).

You should exercise your pelvic floor 3 times a day. The easiest position in which to do it is sitting down or standing, with your legs slightly apart – but once you get familiar with the exercises, you will find you can do them in any position and no one will know a thing!

Top tip: Be patient! It can take a few weeks to gain the benefits of pelvic floor exercises. One study review found that regular training for three months or more yielded the best results.

Mythbuster!

Myth: Men can't do pelvic floor exercises

Fact: Yes they can, and should! It's true that women are more likely to suffer from pelvic floor muscle damage than men, as a result of pregnancy and childbirth, but men can also suffer from stress incontinence and overactive bladder, as a result of lifestyle or medical factors. Men who have had prostate surgery are particularly susceptible to leakage, and are advised to make PFMT part of their routine.

Spotlight on: Pilates

Pilates, named after Joseph Pilates, its founder, is a series of gentle but very precise exercises which was originally designed in the 1930's to help dancers with injuries, muscle imbalances and weaknesses. While Pilates will not help you burn fat, it will certainly assist in restoring good body alignment, muscle strength and balance and there is anecdotal evidence that it is an effective way to strengthen the muscles of the pelvic floor area. Pilates has enjoyed a massive resurgence of interest in the past decade, and you should be able to find a 'mat work' class or Pilates studio near you. Try www.pilatesfoundation.com