

What is my pelvic floor?

Your pelvic floor is a broad sling of muscles, ligaments and sheet-like tissues that stretch from your pubic bone at the front of your body, to the base of your spine at the back.

The pelvic floor is sometimes compared to a trampoline, as it can stretch in response to weight, and bounce up again. Unlike a trampoline, however, if it bears weight for a long time, as it does during pregnancy, the muscles or tissues can become overstretched and weak.

Why is my pelvic floor so important?

Your pelvic floor supports your bladder, bowel, and uterus (womb), and gives you control over when you empty your bladder and bowel.

Having a weak pelvic floor makes it harder for you to squeeze the muscles and sphincters at the bottom of your bladder to prevent wee from escaping. You may accidentally leak a little wee when you cough, sneeze or exercise (stress incontinence). It also means that your bowel, bladder and womb aren't well supported, causing you to feel a heavy, dragging sensation.

Your pelvic floor also affects your vaginal muscles. You may find sex less satisfying, and feel less sensitivity in your vagina, if you have weak pelvic floor.

You'll need to keep your pelvic floor strong for the rest of your life, as hormonal changes after the menopause can make pelvic floor problems more likely. If your vaginal muscles are weak, it's possible for your uterus, bowel or bladder to sag down and push against the walls of your vagina (prolapse) .

Doing just a few pelvic floor exercises every day will help to treat bladder weakness or prolapse symptoms, and will help to prevent problems later on.

How does pregnancy affect my pelvic floor?

Being pregnant can place a lot of stress on your pelvic floor muscles, which can lead to weakness before your baby is born. Your pelvic floor can become weak and stretched from as early as 12 weeks into your pregnancy.

Constipation is common in pregnancy and can put even more strain on your pelvic floor.

How will pelvic floor exercises help me?

If you do your pelvic floor exercises correctly and often, it can help to protect you from leaking wee while you're pregnant and after your baby is born. It will also help to prevent a prolapse.

If you haven't been shown how to do pelvic floor exercises during your antenatal classes, ask your midwife about them at your next visit.

Strong pelvic floor muscles may help to:

- Support the extra weight of pregnancy.

- Heal the area between your anus and vagina (perineum) after birth, by increasing the circulation of blood to it.

- Make for a more satisfying love life, by making orgasms during sex more likely.

How do I find my pelvic floor muscles?

Sit on the arm of a chair, or the edge of a table, and imagine that you're trying to stop yourself from passing wind at the same time as stopping your flow of wee, mid-stream. The feeling is one of squeezing and lifting, or pulling up and in, around your front and back passages, as if you are lifting your perineum off the chair or table.

You should squeeze hard enough to feel a little trembling in your vagina. If you pull hard enough, you may also feel your lower tummy muscles tightening, but you shouldn't feel anything above your belly button. Try to hold this contraction for between six seconds and 10 seconds, and then relax. Try to feel the difference between when the muscles are relaxed, and when they are tight.

You may feel more happening at the front, or you may feel it more around your bottom. As long as you can feel a tightening in at least one of these areas, you will be exercising your pelvic floor.

You need to squeeze and lift without:

- Pulling in your upper tummy (above your belly button).

- Squeezing your legs together.

- Tightening your buttocks.

- Holding your breath.

When you first try pelvic floor exercises, if you can't feel anything when you try them while sitting, try them while lying down. It may help you get a feel for where your muscles are.

Once you know how to do the exercises in this position, doing them while sitting down will become easier.

How can I get better at exercising my pelvic floor?

When you first start exercising your pelvic floor muscles, you may find that you hold your breath as you squeeze. You'll need to learn to breathe normally as you do the exercises. This is because when you cough or sneeze, you breathe out forcefully. If you can only tighten your muscles when you hold your breath, they will relax when you cough or sneeze, and you may leak wee.

To help you get the technique right, try the following exercise:

- Place one hand at the top of your bump, and the other on one of your shoulders. Breathe normally for four or five breaths.
- If your breathing is relaxed, your tummy should move up and down more than the hand on your shoulder. If this is not happening, try to stop your shoulders moving and let your tummy rise and fall naturally.
- Gently pull your pelvic floor up and in, as you breathe out. Start with a gentle contraction until you have managed to coordinate your contraction with a breath out.
- Try then to hold a contraction for a few seconds, while you continue to breathe in and out as normal.
- It's fine to feel your lower tummy muscles tightening. But if you're tightening your upper tummy muscles (above your belly button), you're trying too hard. Go back to the breathing exercise, and start again.
- You should aim to be able to hold a pelvic floor contraction for six seconds to 10 seconds while breathing normally. If you lose your breathing control, stop and start again.

There is a way to help you check if you're doing the exercise properly. Only do this check if you have not been told to avoid sex during pregnancy and don't have any bleeding or infections in your bladder or vagina. Gently insert one or two fingers in your vagina while having a bath. Start doing the exercises. You should feel a squeeze and lift inside your vagina if you are exercising your pelvic floor muscles correctly.

Once you have got the basic exercise down to fine art, you can try fast pull-ups. Begin by making sure you are breathing in a relaxed way. As you breathe out, pull up your pelvic floor muscles, and let go quickly. Then try to pull up and let go quickly up to 10 times in a row, without holding your breath.

This exercise helps your pelvic floor muscles to react quickly when you cough, sneeze or laugh. It only works if your pelvic floor muscles are already strong enough to support your pelvic floor, which is why it is important to master slow contractions first.

It is much harder to learn how to do these exercises after your baby is born, so practise as much as you can while you're pregnant.

How often do I need to exercise my pelvic floor muscles?

Try doing them between eight and 12 times, three times a day, or more often if you sometimes leak wee. Try to do as many as you can as you go about your daily routine, so they become part of your life.

To strengthen your muscles, do this many exercises for at least eight weeks. If you stop doing them after this time, your muscles can lose their strength. If you are over 35, and it is your first baby, it may take your pelvic floor muscles longer to recover after the birth. So it's even more important to strengthen them while you're pregnant.

What else do I need to know about my pelvic floor?

It is just as important to learn how to relax your pelvic floor as it is to tighten it. When your baby's head crowns during the second stage of labour, your muscles need to relax. Some midwives believe that a relaxed pelvic floor at this stage can help prevent tearing or an episiotomy. Also, if your muscles can't relax properly, they will tire more quickly.

After you have tightened your pelvic floor muscles, relax them fully, before tightening them again. For some women, a gentle push out at the end of each pelvic floor contraction will help. Getting your breathing right will make this easier.

You can also protect your pelvic floor by drinking fluids as you would usually, and only having a wee when your bladder feels full. It's quite normal to go to the toilet more often during pregnancy, though, so don't try to hold on for too long.

If you find that pelvic floor exercises don't help you control your bladder, ask your GP, obstetrician or midwife to refer you to a women's health physiotherapist or continence nurse. For more information on incontinence problems, contact The Continence Foundation.

Information source:

<http://www.babycentre.co.uk/a536339/your-pelvic-floor-in-pregnancy#ixzz35H7A4wIL>