

Pelvic Floor Exercises (Kegel's)

Introduction

Pelvic floor exercises are easy exercises that can help improve your bladder or bowel control. When done properly and regularly, these exercises – also called Kegel's Exercises – can build up and strengthen the muscles of the pelvic floor to help you to hold your urine or feces. They may also improve satisfaction during sexual intercourse.

What is the Pelvic Floor?

The 'floor' of your pelvis is made up of muscles that support the bowel, bladder, urethra, and uterus (see diagram 1). These muscles are like a hammock, or the bottom and sides of a bowl, in shape. They run from the pubic bone in the front to the end of the spinal column (or tail bone) in the back. They provide support to the pelvic organs (see diagram 2).

Diagram 1 - The Pelvic Organs & Floor

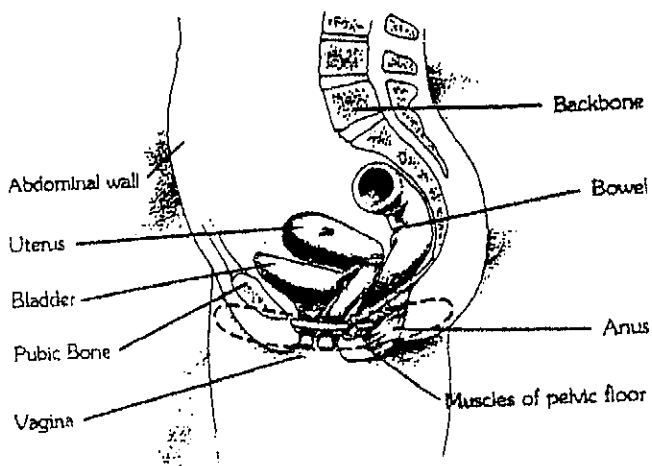
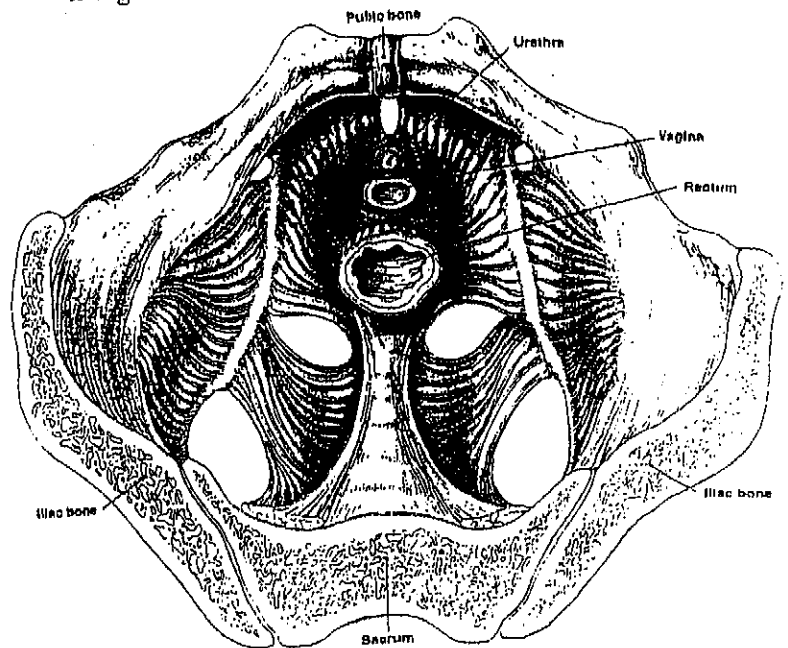


Diagram 2 - The Pelvic Floor Muscles



What does the pelvic floor do?

The pelvic floor supports all the organs inside the abdomen, especially when one is standing upright. It helps to hold the bladder in its correct place. The pelvic floor muscles are firm and slightly tense to control the flow of urine from the bladder, or feces from the bowel. When you urinate, or have a bowel movement, these muscles relax. Afterward, they tighten again and stay that way to restore control of your urine flow and bowel movements. However, pelvic floor muscles may become weak. When this happens, there is less support for the bladder and bowel, less control, and urine and feces may leak.

How can pelvic floor exercises help?

Pelvic floor exercises strengthen the pelvic hammock to help give proper support to the pelvic organs. This will help you to improve your bladder and bowel control and reduce or stop the leaking of urine and/or feces.

Learning to do the pelvic floor exercises

It is important that you learn how to do the pelvic floor exercises correctly. It is important that you do them regularly. You should also check from time to time that you are still doing them correctly. If the wrong muscles are exercised, there will be no benefit. It may take several months to gain consistent pelvic floor muscle control. However, people often experience improvement in their urinary or bowel leakage immediately after starting the exercises. Regular pelvic floor exercises will keep these muscles working well.

How to "feel" (identify) the muscles of the pelvic floor

When learning to contract (tighten) the correct pelvic floor muscles, many people make the mistake of simply tightening their abdominal muscles. It is important that you learn how the muscles of the pelvic floor "feel" as you contract them. This will help you to be sure that you are exercising the proper muscles. The aim is to tighten the muscles surrounding the vagina and rectum (back passage). When done correctly, you should feel as though the opening to the back passage is being pulled inside. Here are some ways to identify your pelvic floor muscles:

(1) Imagine trying to stop yourself from passing wind or diarrhoea from the bowel. To do this, you would squeeze the muscle around the anus. Try squeezing that muscle as if you really did have wind. Do it now. You should be able to feel the muscle move. You should be aware of the skin around the anus tightening and the anus being pulled up and away from whatever you are sitting on. Really try to feel this. Do *not* move the buttocks and thighs. Do *not* hold your breath - breathe normally. Do *not* tighten your abdominal or buttock muscles - keep them relaxed. Later, you can check whether you are contracting the correct muscles by touching the opening at the rectum as you are tightening the muscle - you should feel the opening of the rectum contract at the same time.

(2) Next time you go to the toilet, try to stop the stream of urine about halfway through emptying your bladder. Then relax the muscles and allow the bladder to empty completely. The muscles you use to stop the flow of urine are the same muscles you will be squeezing when doing the Kegel's exercises. Once you have identified your pelvic floor muscles this way, however, do *not* make a habit of doing it during voiding. This may cause incomplete emptying of your bladder and may lead to other urinary problems. Just practice contracting these muscles at other times as though you were stopping an imaginary urine flow.

(3) You may place one or two clean fingers into the vagina and tighten the pelvic floor muscles to squeeze the fingers. If you are tightening the correct muscles, you should feel a tightening around the finger(s).

The Kegel's Exercise:

1. Squeeze the pelvic muscles tight and hold the contraction for 5 seconds. Then relax for 10 seconds before starting the next contraction. Repeat this sequence of squeezing for 5 seconds and resting for 10 seconds. Do it 10 times each morning, afternoon, and night.
2. Gradually increase to:
 - 15 contractions - 3x/day
 - 20 contractions - 3x/day
 - 20 contractions - 4x/day
 - 20 contractions - 4x/day *plus* 20 extra whenever possible.

Notes to Remember:

1. These exercises can be done virtually anywhere - sitting, lying, or standing.
2. Do them regularly! They will only help if done on a regular basis.
3. Establish a routine time for doing these Kegel's exercises. Schedule the times you exercise with activities that you do every day. This will help you to remember to do the exercises on a regular basis. For example, do them while traveling to and from work in the car or bus. Or, do them when you listen/watch the morning and evening news on the radio/tv. Use the radio/tv program theme song as a reminder. Make them part of your daily life.
3. Do the exercises properly - check often to be sure you are exercising the correct muscles.
4. Do these exercises when you need them most. Tighten the pelvic floor muscles when you change positions (for example, getting up from a chair). Tighten them before you laugh, cough or sneeze, as you lift or push, or whenever you need for better bladder control.
5. Do not be discouraged. It may take several weeks before you see any benefit. Do not give up. Once your muscle strength improves so that urine is no longer lost, continue doing your exercises at least every other day. The pelvic muscles are like any muscle of the body. They must be exercised regularly to stay strong.

Other Techniques to Use With Kegel's

If you find it difficult to identify the correct muscles to exercise, your healthcare professional can help. He or she may recommend the use of the following:

(1) Biofeedback:

Biofeedback equipment helps you identify and exercise your pelvic muscles. Biofeedback uses a probe inserted into the vagina and a computer monitor. It allows you to see the effects of your muscle contractions on the monitor. This way you can more easily know if you are contracting the correct muscles and using proper Kegel's exercise technique. It is a teaching tool *only*.

(2) Vaginal Cones:

Vaginal cones are a set of vaginal weights which can be inserted into the vagina to help identify and strengthen the pelvic muscles. They are used with Kegel's exercises. Once a cone is inserted, you try to hold it in place by contracting the pelvic muscles for a short period of time before removing the cone.