THE PELVIC FLOOR

The pelvic floor is a sling of muscles like a taught hammock between your legs. The pelvic floor is made up of deep and superficial muscles. They also consist of fast and slow twitch muscles fibres. They are attached to the pubic bone at the front of the pelvis, the coccyx at the end of the spine and the sitting bones at the bottom of your pelvis (ischium). We could refer to this as your ‘undercarriage’

The openings in a female form your urethra (bladder) at the front, the vagina (womb) in the middle and the rectum (bowels) at the back all pass through the pelvic floor.



The pelvic floor helps to keep all your internal organs and your uterus or prostate gland in place. It supports the bladder and helps it remain closed. In men the urethra and the anus pass through the pelvic floor.

When you sneeze or cough the pelvic floor actively contracts to prevent leakage in women and dribbling in men. It can help to control your bowels when holding on and can also control wind. Very useful on a first date! The pelvic floor has an important sexual function and can help improve sex life both in males and females. Oh so you are interested now!

You should do pelvic floor exercises daily and for the rest of your life. It is essential that you work these muscles any time but specifically when you are pregnant, postnatal or have had back problems.

WHEN DOING PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES YOU SHOULD:

* Avoid actively contracting the abdominals, though you may find the deep abdominals contract involuntarily (slightly) as you contract your pelvic floor.
* Avoid gripping with the muscles of the legs
* Avoid tension or clenching the buttocks
* Avoid holding your breath
* Keep the shoulders and hands relaxed

There are many ways to exercise your pelvic floor; one of the main ways to do this is to breathe normally as you draw up from the vagina in women then the urethra and back passage. Get a sensation as if you are lifting the vagina and or the urethra upwards toward the belly button. Breathe normally and hold this contraction, it would be ideal for you to build up to about 10 seconds and then lower the contractions slowly rather than just letting it release. (Though it may take you some time to achieve this). Try to do this exercise several times a day. Remember to avoid stopping your urine flow mid way as an exercise for your pelvic floor. Your mum or granny may have been told to do this but it is now thought doing so on a regular basis many increase the possibility of infection. However, I do recommend that once a week if your bladder if quite full to try and draw up on your pelvic floor and stop yourself peeing for a couple of seconds then restart your urine flow, purely as a test to see if your pelvic floor muscles are working correctly. Don’t forget this should be used as a test not as a regular exercise.

The exercise above was using a slower contraction and therefore more of the slower twitch muscle fibres of the pelvic floor. Do some regular fast contractions 10-15 times. This can be done in a number of ways the most basic would be to imagine your are bringing the exits between your legs closer together and then lift upward in one movement. Contact and release as if you were switching a lift on and off.

For men (so my husband says) it is as if you are retracting your testicles and imagining you are trying to twitch your penis.

Pregnancy and childbirth both have a weakening effect on the pelvic floor, as does being very overweight, inactive, illness, injury, lifting heavy weights and persistent coughing. Even if women do not have a vaginal delivery they may still have weakened pelvic floor muscles due to the weight of the baby and the pressure on the pelvic floor. During pregnancy the pelvic floor is stressed, this in combination with pregnancy hormones can mean that the pelvic floor is not as strong as it should be even before the baby is born.

Norwegian researchers found that women who had followed an eight week programme of pelvic floor exercises during their pregnancy had less urine leakage than other women in the control group even a year after the birth.

When sitting on a chair or on the toilet (sitting on a stability ball is great for this) perform normal pelvic floor exercises, draw up from the vagina to the urethra and back passage hold for a few seconds then slowly relax.

Put your elbows on the knees and lean forwards, draw up again from the vagina and then the urethra and back passage, you will find that you can’t feel the contraction in the back passage as much and the contraction is felt more in the vagina and the urethra. As you lean forwards the back passage opens and the muscles around the pelvic floor and more relaxed.

Do regular pelvic floor work where you sit up and some where you lean forwards to isolate and train the different areas of the pelvic floor.

Another way of helping you to activate the pelvic floor is to think of the pubic bone at the front of the pelvis and the coccyx at the tail end of the spine at the back of the pelvis. Think of drawing these two parts closer together hold for up to ten seconds and relax the muscles. Focus on your sitting bones at the bottom of the pelvis. Think of drawing these two points closer together and again hold for up to ten seconds and relax. Now think of the front back and bottom points all drawing closer together. Feel as if you are drawing these muscles up to the belly button. Hold for ten seconds and then slowly relax.

It is important to mention the relationship of the pelvic floor and the deepest of the abdominals the transverus abdominis. The pelvic floor and the transversus are both on the same neurological loop. Therefore if you exercise your pelvic floor there may be a slight conditioning effect on the deep abdominals and vice versa. To really help prevent stress incontinence and maintain good core stability you should do regular exercises on both the pelvic floor and the deep abdominals.

Like any exercise don’t overdo it, the pelvic floor muscles can be trained several times a day every day unlike other muscles where you want to give the muscle a day’s rest between workouts. I have no scientific research to back this up but I often say to my clients that it won’t do them any harm to do pelvic floor exercises every day. However if you find yourself getting really bored with them have a day off. If you forget to do them one day don’t worry start again with earnest the next!

Good luck and happy contracting!