

For patients: Advice for women who have urinary stress incontinence (and who are aged 16 to 65 years)

What is urinary stress incontinence?

Urinary stress incontinence is a type of incontinence caused by weakened pelvic floor muscles. It can cause leakage of urine when the area is put under pressure eg while sneezing, coughing, laughing or bending over. There are several other forms of incontinence, including faecal (bowel) incontinence. Your doctor and/or physiotherapist can diagnose which type you have and why, and recommend the most appropriate treatment options for you. For further information you can also contact The Continence Foundation Helpline: 0845 345 0165.

Where are the pelvic floor muscles and what do they do normally?

The pelvic floor muscles form a 'muscular hammock' underneath your pelvis (hip bones), which provides support and control for both your bladder and bowel. The muscles attach to your pubic bone in front, then span backward to your coccyx (tailbone) behind. The openings of the bladder, vagina and bowel all pass through the pelvic floor. The muscles also contribute to sexual satisfaction.

Why can pelvic floor muscles become weak?

The pelvic floor muscles can be affected by hormonal changes (eg. during pregnancy and /or menopause), and/or can be weakened as a result of childbirth, pelvic surgery, persistent heavy straining due to constipation, a chronic cough, repetitive heavy lifting and from being overweight.

What treatments and exercises are available for weak pelvic floor muscles?

Exercises for pelvic floor muscle are an effective 'self-treatment' for urinary stress incontinence. They increase the strength of the pelvic floor muscles and enhance your bladder control. If you are having persistent problems or would like extra help with pelvic floor exercises ask your GP to refer you to see a nurse or physiotherapist who specialises in this area. Or you may self-refer to the Continence Advisory Service (Tel: 01353 652145)

What is a pelvic floor muscle exercise and how should I start doing them?

A pelvic floor contraction is performed by closing and 'drawing up' your urethra (front passage) and anus (back passage).

To teach yourself which muscles to exercise, **imagine** you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine. The feeling is one of 'squeeze and lift'.

You can also check you are contracting the correct muscles by placing your index finger or thumb into your vagina while you are doing the exercise. You should feel that the internal muscle is soft when you are relaxed, but tightens and becomes firmer when you deliberately pull up your pelvic floor.

What are the two types of muscle exercises?

There are two types of muscle fibres that you are aiming to strengthen: fast action muscle fibres and slow action fibres. To exercise both of these, you need to perform two types of exercises:

1. Quick contractions: which will help your muscles to react quickly when you laugh, cough, sneeze, exercise or lift things.

- a. Squeeze the pelvic floor muscles firmly and then let go completely.
- b. Rest a second, then repeat.

- c. Aim to build up to ten cycles in a row.

2. Endurance contractions: which will help you to 'hold' your bladder for longer when it is full.

- a. Perform a pelvic floor contraction as above, but this time try to hold it while you continue to breathe in and out.
 - b. Start by holding for three breathing cycles, aiming to build up to 10 cycles.
 - c. Repeat as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 10).
- Start doing these exercises gently and stop if they hurt.

While you are doing these exercises:

- Don't pull in your stomach excessively;
- Don't squeeze your legs together;
- Don't tighten your buttocks;
- Don't hold your breath.

When and where can I do them?

You can perform these exercises in a variety of positions (eg. lying, standing or sitting). No one needs to know you are doing them.

If you wish to practise these exercises on the toilet, it is best to do so **after** you have emptied your bladder.

Why isn't it a good idea to do these exercises while I am urinating?

Previously, women were advised to exercise their pelvic floor muscles by stopping the flow of urine for a few seconds and then restarting it. This is no longer recommended because it might interfere with normal emptying of the bladder.

How often and for how long do I need to do my exercises?

To see an improvement in symptoms, you will need to do some pelvic floor muscle exercises every day; you should expect to see an improvement after about one month. If, despite diligent exercise, you are not seeing improvement, seek further help from a specialist nurse or physiotherapist.

If you have had a weak pelvic floor, you will need to keep up the exercises on a regular basis to maintain your muscle strength.

What else can I do to prevent leakage of urine?

There are several things you can do to prevent problems with urinary incontinence caused by weak pelvic floor muscles. For example:

- Try to avoid emptying your bladder too frequently; ie don't get into the habit of going 'just in case'. This will teach the bladder to stretch comfortably. You should aim to go to the toilet about 7 to 8 times a day, which is every 3 to 4 hours.
 - Some bladders are 'overactive'. They want to empty at inconvenient moments. You can use a strong pelvic floor contraction held for 20 to 30 seconds to calm a feeling of 'urgency'
 - Avoid having too many caffeinated drinks (such as tea, coffee and cola) because they can aggravate bladder and bowel symptoms.
 - Avoid becoming constipated because a full bowel can cause extra pressure on your bladder and because straining hard to empty your bowel can stretch and weaken your pelvic floor. The easiest, safest way to avoid becoming constipated is to eat sufficient dietary fibre and to ensure you have an adequate fluid intake.
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- To avoid straining when opening your bowels, adopt an efficient posture. When you are sitting on the toilet, sit with your feet on a small box (or step, or pile of books) and lean forward aiming to have your knees slightly higher than your hips. Relax your body and your pelvic floor, and do not pull in your abdominal muscles.