

Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

Having a cough for a long period of time is one of a number of different causes of weakness of some very important muscles, usually called the pelvic floor muscles. These muscles prevent leakage of urine and bowel movements, as well as controlling escape of wind (flatus) at embarrassing times. Weak muscles may mean that you lose this control for example when you cough, sneeze or laugh or even as a result of a sudden urgent desire to wee. Strong muscles help you hold on to get to the toilet in time.

You have been given this leaflet as you are recovering from (or living with) a chronic cough or recovering from **Covid-19**. You may still have the cough for some time yet. It is also possible that you also had a small tube (called a catheter) in place so that your bladder could empty into a bag at any time you were unable to get out of bed to use the toilet. This can sometimes affect your control of urine.

If you are having any difficulty getting your bladder or bowel back to normal and are experiencing new or worsening symptoms it is really important that you begin pelvic floor strengthening exercises. They are also a good idea to do as a way of helping prevent any of these symptoms developing in the future.

Finding your pelvic floor muscle:

For Women: Imagine you are drawing in the muscles around your back passage as if you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind. You can also squeeze around your front passage, imagining you are stopping yourself passing urine. It may help to imagine you are closing the doors of a lift and then the lift moves up.

For men: Squeeze and lift from the front by either imagining you are trying to stop yourself from passing urine, or trying to shorten/draw your penis up and inwards. Now try lifting the muscles from the back as if stopping the escape of wind. When you feel you have the hang of it, try lifting the front and back together.

It is important never to try this whilst you are actually passing urine.

This may cause back flow of urine to your kidneys, an infection and also disrupt the normal way you empty your bladder.

Very often it is difficult to find these internal muscles. There is a tendency to use other muscles like your buttocks, inner thighs and tummy, instead of your pelvic floor muscles, in order to “feel” something happening.

So make sure you tighten:-

- **Without** pulling in your tummy.
- **Without** squeezing your legs together.
- **Without** tightening buttocks.
- **Without** holding your breath.

How to exercise:

Pelvic floor muscles need to have both endurance and strength to function properly. It is therefore important that you do both exercises. Exercise 1 for endurance and Exercise 2 for strength.

Exercise 1: (endurance)

Contract as above and hold the squeeze for as many seconds as you can and then relax, resting for the same number of seconds as the hold.

It is important to do this without holding your breath so count out loud to ensure you are breathing normally.

Repeat. Gradually increase the hold time, **up to ten seconds**, and up to ten repetitions. It may take several months to reach this stage

- **Exercise 2: (strength)**

Tighten the pelvic floor muscles quickly and strongly for one second and then relax for one second. Repeat in rapid succession up to twenty times each session.

To be effective these exercises should be done in different positions. Start when you are lying down as this is the easiest. You also need to be able to contract against the force of gravity in an upright position. Once you can perform ten second holds with ten repetitions in lying, progress to doing these exercises in sitting and then standing.

Begin gently as you recover being led by any tiredness and fatigue you may experience

Once you are fully recovered aim to exercise around 4 times a day for 4-6 months to reach your maximum strength and endurance.

However unless you continue to exercise regularly once or twice a day the muscles will weaken again.

What else?

Just before, and during, anything that increases the pressure in your tummy, such as a cough, sneeze, lifting remember to squeeze tight your pelvic floor muscles to brace against this pressure. "This is called the Knack"

Make exercising as important as dental care and part of your daily routine!

If your symptoms do not improve after four months of exercise, then please speak to your GP about a referral to specialist pelvic health physiotherapist or the Bladder & Bowel Service.

More details can be found at <https://pogp.csp.org.uk>

