

Some women are sensitive to caffeine which is found in tea, coffee, coke and chocolate. Reducing your caffeine intake may reduce your frequency, urge and any incontinence. Some women may be sensitive to alcohol.

Cranberry juice may ease your symptoms.

Above all do not restrict your fluid intake!

#### **Things to Avoid**

- Constipation: Straining to force the bowels open stretches and weakens the pelvic floor. If constipation is a problem check your fibre intake, make sure you include fibres like bran that bulk the stool and fruits like oranges, grapes and cherries that aid the motility.

If this is a persistent problem discuss it with your therapist or G.P.

- Avoid heavy lifting or standing for long periods of time, as these may put a strain on the pelvic floor. Divide your shopping into several lighter bags rather than 1 or 2 heavy ones. Use the little trolley rather than the big one. Empty the washing machine in 2 loads rather than all at once. Better still ask someone else to help you!
- Avoid strenuous high impact activity if it causes you to leak until you start to feel stronger. Change to low impact exercise such as walking, cycling or swimming.
- Being overweight may make your symptoms worse as there is more strain on the tissues. Reducing your weight to your ideal level can improve things.

**Pace yourself. Allow your pelvic floor time to rest and recuperate. Rest with your feet up for at least 1 hour a day.**

**N.B. You wouldn't start training for a marathon and not expect rest your legs at some point don't expect more from your poor pelvic floor.**

Further information may be found:

[www.womenswaterworks.com](http://www.womenswaterworks.com)

[www.bladdermatters.co.uk](http://www.bladdermatters.co.uk)

[www.menopausematters.co.uk](http://www.menopausematters.co.uk)

[www.holditsister.com](http://www.holditsister.com)

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PHYSIOTHERAPY AND  
SPORTS INJURIES CENTRE**

## Coping with Incontinence and Pelvic Organ Prolapse



A short guide to the conditions associated pelvic floor weakness and its rehabilitation

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## THE PELVIC FLOOR

The pelvic floor is comprised of a group of muscles, ligaments and fascia working together to provide support for all the pelvic organs. The tissues connect the coccyx or base of your spine with the pubic symphysis, at the front and the sit bones to the side like a hammock to actively lift the bladder and bowel and keep you continent.

Over time the ligamentous tissues and fascia may stretch and the muscles become weaker. This may be accelerated due to extra strain during childbirth, straining from constipation, lifting and the general wear and tear from standing for prolonged periods of time, over many years.

As your hormonal levels vary during your cycle or as you approach and go through the menopause you may find the tissues lose their resilience and the muscles feel a bit weaker, increasing your symptoms.

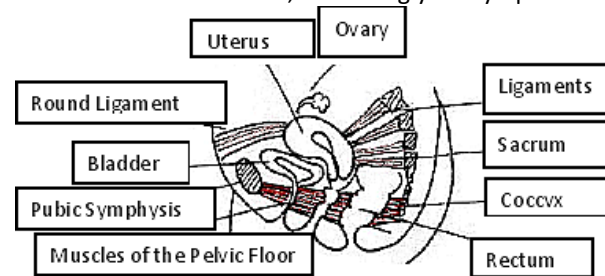


Figure 1 pelvic anatomy

## PELVIC ORGAN PROLAPSE

This occurs when the ligaments and fascia stretch so that the one or more of the pelvic organs moves down into the vaginal area. This may affect the bladder (an anterior prolapse or cystocele), the womb (a uterine prolapse) or the bowel (a posterior prolapse or rectocele). Often women with a prolapse may feel 'things are just a bit different' or there is more bulk or tissue within the vagina.

Sometimes, however, they may describe a dragging ache or discomfort, either within the lower abdomen into the front of the thighs, or low back ache into the back of the thighs, depending on where the tissues are weakest.

will be instructed in more detail about your own exercise plan by your therapist.

Generally, however, you should remember you want these muscles to support you and keep you continent while you continue with everything else within your life so working them should be at a level that enables you to continue with standing sitting and especially breathing!

Try tightening gently as you breathe out and then hold maintain this for about 10 seconds or while you breathe in and out normally once or twice. Gently relax and then start again. You should repeat this 10 times or for about 2 minutes.

Sometimes it helps to tighten your muscles while you listen to music.

Always tighten the pelvic floor before coughing, sneezing lifting or any other activity that makes you leak.

## Bladder Training

As young children we are often taught to empty our bladders at every opportunity 'just in case'. Unfortunately continuing to do this can make it hard for us to hold on when we really need to.

If your frequency has gradually increased to the point where you are looking for a toilet more than every 2 hours and you struggle to sleep through the night without getting up to go to the toilet, you can change this by retraining your muscles and your bladder. When you feel the first need to empty your bladder, or urge, sit on something hard, squeeze your thighs together and squeeze your pelvic floor for 8 – 10 seconds. This switches the urgency and the muscles in the wall of the bladder off so that the urge will decrease. Initially this is the time to go to the toilet and this will ensure you stay dry. As you become more confident you can practice suppressing the 2<sup>nd</sup> urge and so on until your bladder gradually stretches and allows you to sleep through the night again or last all the way through a film or play.

## Fluid Intake

Drink at least 3- 4 pints a day.

If you have ever attended a Pilates class you may have heard of the core or deep postural muscles. The pelvic floor muscles are part of this group and it can help to recruit other core muscles at the same time, especially the deep abdominal muscles, transversus abdominus.

Imagine you are trying to draw your hip bones together so that your tummy button moves towards your spine.

You can work your pelvic floor muscles in any position; e.g. lying, sitting or standing. It may, however, be difficult to feel things properly when you are lying down and it may be difficult to lift well in standing. Many women find that if they sit on a hard chair they find it easiest to appreciate the feeling of lifting and drawing up inside.

Don't forget to breathe!!

### **Daily Exercise Regime**

Your therapist will expect you to practice these exercises at least 3 – 4 times a day. Don't worry, each set should only take about 2 minutes and you can practice them while you are doing other things. It usually helps to combine these exercises with some other part of your daily routine e.g. cleaning your teeth, applying your make up (and taking it off again!). It doesn't matter what you choose as long as it's a routine that you will be doing every day and you don't need to think about too hard. Pelvic floor exercises can be done in the car but it's easy to get distracted and not finish the full set! Using red traffic lights are a good reminder for an extra set but again not all junctions will allow you the full 2 minutes you need and other drivers may not understand?!

Remember you are trying to start a habit that will stay with you for the rest of your life.

The muscles of the pelvic floor are like many other 'postural muscles' made up of both fast twitch and slow twitch fibres. It is important to educate both, you

These symptoms are generally worse by the end of the day and may depend on how long you are on your feet or how much heavy physical work you have done. Some women may find excess weight gain will exacerbate their symptoms.

### **URINARY INCONTINENCE**

This may be one of two types or a mixture of both.

#### **Stress Incontinence**

When the pelvic floor muscles are weak or slow to react any increase in abdominal pressure may cause a small amount of urine to leak. This is usually triggered by coughing, sneezing, lifting or jumping, but sometimes may be related to bending over, changes in posture or wearing high heels. Generally the leaking will not be affected by the amount you have drunk and attempts to manage your symptoms by reducing your fluid intake or increasing the number of times you empty your bladder will not cure the problem and may lead to other more distressing symptoms. Retraining your muscle control and strength is the most effective way of helping you back to a comfortable and confident life. Your physiotherapist will guide you as to the best way for you to rehabilitate your muscles.

#### **Urge Incontinence**

##### **(Latchkey Incontinence)**

This is a problem where the sufferer feels desperate as soon as the bladder starts to fill to a certain capacity. They feel that if they don't rush immediately to the first available toilet they will not be able to stop the inevitable loss of urine. In extreme cases rushing to empty may further increase the pressure leading to loss of control, from a few drops as they start to pull down their underwear to what may feel like the full bladder volume in very extreme cases.

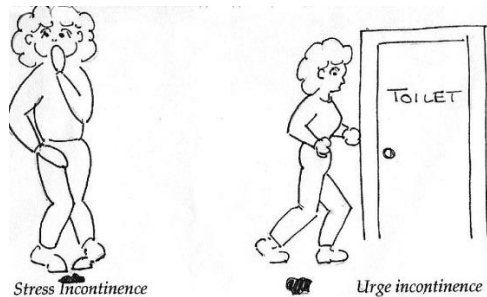
Again often the instinctive reaction is to restrict one's drinking and to increase the frequency that you visit the toilet, often before the urge is obvious, for 'surely if the bladder is empty the control will not become an issue?' This may

date back to early bladder training as an infant when we are often encouraged to go to the toilet whether we need to or not, 'just in case'.

This is not the answer as the bladder never reaches its full stretch and gradually the urge will be felt with smaller and smaller volumes, causing the person to need to empty sooner and the frequency to become greater to the point that it may become difficult to sit through a film or a play, to drive for any distance without stopping and ultimately the bladder may start to wake you in the night once then twice and sometimes more.

Decreasing your fluid intake will dehydrate you leading to constipation and other problems but of more immediate concern receptors within the lining of the bladder, designed to protect you from infections and stale urine, will be triggered increasing the urgency and making it harder to control.

In most cases these symptoms develop over a slow period of time and the patient is unaware of the deterioration until they reach the point that their life starts to revolve around the bladder, leading to a comprehensive knowledge of where the best and most accessible toilets in the area are situated.



### **Pelvic Floor Exercises**

(Making your hammock stronger.)

The pelvic floor muscles work when you try to stop yourself passing water or wind, so the easiest way to feel where they are is to imagine you are stopping yourself from passing wind and then try to imagine you are stopping yourself during urination.

When we visualise the pelvic floor contracting on an ultrasound scan we actually see a drawing forward of the muscle fibres from the coccyx toward the pubic bone. This is a tightening forward and upward, in a sort of scooping action below the bladder. Your therapist may use the ultrasound scanner to enable you to visualise your own muscles if you would like to try this. Imagine you are trying to draw your coccyx or tail bone forward toward your pubic bone.

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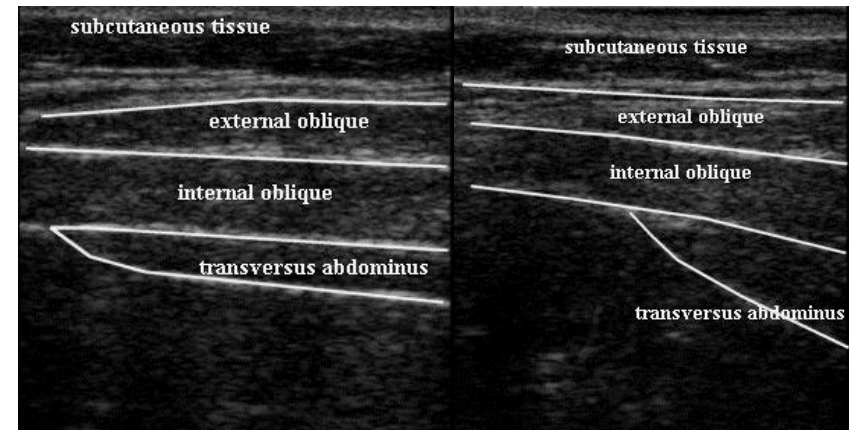


Figure 2 ultrasound images of transversus abdominus first in a relaxed then contracted state