

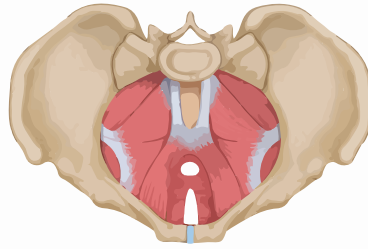
Pelvic Floor Muscle Training

What are the Pelvic Floor Muscles?

The pelvic floor muscles are a collection of muscles that provide support for pelvic organs to include the uterus, vagina, bladder and bowels.

They are important in the control of urination or bowel movements, and play a key role in sexual function.

Injury or weakness to the muscles can cause symptoms such as urinary leakage, feces or gas leakage, pain with intimacy, pelvic organ prolapse, and sexual dysfunction.



Where are the Pelvic Floor Muscles?

The pelvic floor muscles form a hammock or sling at the bottom of the pelvis and support the surrounding structures. To find out which muscles that can be trained, try the following:

Sit or lie down with the muscles of your thighs, buttocks and stomach relaxed. Squeeze and lift the ring of muscles around the anus and vagina as if trying to stop passing gas. It should feel like they lift up inside the pelvis. Next, relax these muscles. Squeeze and let go a couple of times to be sure the correct muscles have been found. Try not to squeeze the buttocks, thighs, or stomach muscles.

If there is trouble feeling a distinct squeeze and lift, ask a provider or pelvic therapist to recommend “pelvic health rehabilitation” and to assist with optimal muscle activation and coordination.

Benefits of Pelvic Floor Muscle Training

Pelvic floor muscle coordination is important for the support of pelvic organs, stabilization of the pelvis and spine, and assistance with sexual function. Pelvic floor muscle training is recommended to prevent and treat pelvic floor disorders and involuntary loss or leakage of urine, feces, or gas.

- Improved bladder control
- Improved bowel movements
- Improved sexual function
- Expeditious recovery from childbirth
- Protection against prolapse of pelvic organs
- Decreased lower back pain
- Better flexibility with exercises

Effects of Pregnancy on Pelvic Floor Muscles



During pregnancy, the pelvic floor muscles work extra hard to support the growing baby and extra body weight.

Hormones produced during pregnancy cause the connective tissues attached to the pelvic floor muscles to soften. This allows them to stretch more easily in preparation for giving birth.

Regardless of whether you have a vaginal delivery or cesarean section, your muscles will be impacted and will require strengthening.



1 out of 3 women will have unintentional loss of urine during late pregnancy.

1 out of 3 women will leak urine in the first three months after giving birth.

1 out of 4 women will have unintentional loss of gas or feces in late pregnancy.

1 out of 5 women will leak gas or feces one year after birth.

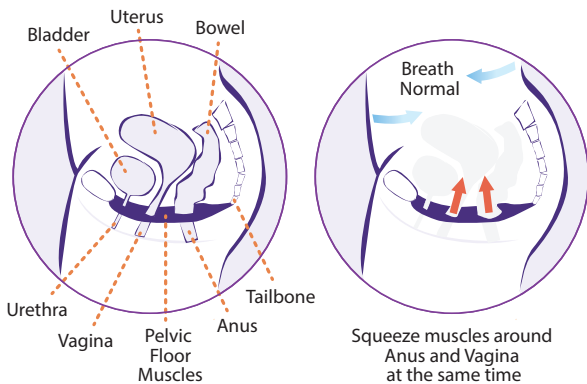
Ways to improve Pelvic Floor Muscle Health

Performing pelvic floor muscle training exercises on a daily basis is the best way to maximize its benefits. However, it should be part of an overall exercise regimen to optimize health.

If the pregnancy is uncomplicated, it is recommended to also engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week during pregnancy.

Other things to do to improve overall pelvic floor health:

- Stay hydrated to avoid constipation. Drink fluids throughout the day.
- Do not strain to have a bowel movement or to empty the bladder.
- Maintain an appropriate weight for your height and age.



How to do Pelvic Floor Muscle Training Exercises

Pelvic floor muscle training involves repetitive squeezing and relaxing of the pelvic floor muscles. Once the pelvic floor muscles have been identified, follow these instructions on a training plan. See the illustration above for correct pelvic floor muscle contraction.

1. Squeeze and draw in the muscles around the anus and vagina at the same time. It should feel like they lift up inside the pelvis.
2. Hold the muscles tight for several seconds while you exhale.
3. Let go of the muscles and relax.
4. Do not hold breath or tighten the buttocks. Keep the thighs relaxed.
5. Perform the exercises while lying down, sitting, and standing.
6. Once the exercises are mastered at rest, you can attempt them while exercising, with other activities, or in different functional positions.

Example Training Program for Pelvic Floor Muscles

Quick Exercises

Rapid contractions with squeezing for two seconds and relaxation for one second. A set includes ten contractions with rest in between.

Endurance Exercises

Sustained contractions with squeezing for 12 seconds and relaxation for five (5) seconds. One set includes ten contractions with rest in between.

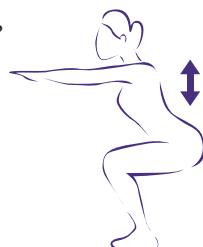
- For each exercise time, perform two (2) sets of Quick Exercises and three (3) sets of Endurance Exercises.
- Complete the full cycle (2 x 10 Quick Exercises and 3 x 10 Endurance Exercises) three (3) times each day.
- Keep a record of the time, number of sets completed, and position you were in.
- Record any notes regarding the exercises as well as any symptoms (eg. incontinence, etc.) you may have had during the day.
- It is reasonable to start with fewer sets or repetitions early in the program and increase as your strength and endurance improve.



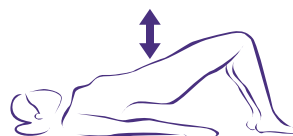
Cat - Cow Stretch



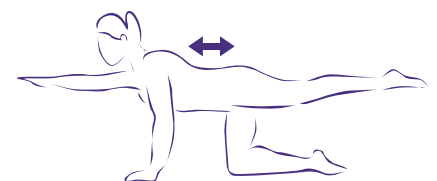
Side Clamshell



Squats



Pelvic Tilt



Bird Dog

Sample exercise record log

DATE	Quick Exercise	Endurance Exercise	Position	Notes
DAY 1	1	1		
	2	2		
	3	3		
DAY 2	1	1		
	2	2		
	3	3		

Screening Tool (endorsed by DHA)

The Cozean Screening Tool below can help determine if you may benefit from seeing a pelvic health rehabilitation clinician. If you have three (3) or more of these symptoms, pelvic floor dysfunction is likely. Talk to your doctor and request a referral.

COZEAN PELVIC DYSFUNCTION SCREENING TOOL

- ☐ I sometimes have pelvic pain (in genitals, perineum, pubic or bladder area, or pain with urination) that exceeds a '3' on a 1-10 pain scale, with 10 being the worst pain imaginable.
- ☐ I can remember falling onto my tailbone, lower back, or buttocks (even in childhood).
- ☐ I sometimes experience one or more of the following urinary symptoms:
 - Accidental loss of urine.
 - Feeling unable to completely empty my bladder.
 - Having to void within a few minutes of a previous void.
 - Pain or burning with urination.
 - Difficulty starting or frequent stopping/starting of urine stream.
- ☐ I often or occasionally have to get up to urinate two or more times at night.
- ☐ I sometimes have a feeling of increased pelvic pressure or the sensation of my pelvic organs slipping down or falling out.
- ☐ I have a history of pain in my low back, hip, groin, or tailbone or have had sciatica.
- ☐ I sometimes experience one or more of the following bowel symptoms:
 - Loss of bowel control.
 - Feeling unable to completely empty my bowels.
 - Straining or pain with a bowel movement.
 - Difficulty initiating a bowel movement.
- ☐ I sometimes experience pain or discomfort with sexual activity or intercourse.
- ☐ Sexual activity increases one or more of my other symptoms.
- ☐ Prolonged sitting increases my symptoms.



When to Seek Help from a healthcare provider

Despite being diligent with following a pelvic floor muscle training program, it is still possible to have problems that need to be addressed. Talk to a pregnancy provider if the following occur:

- Inability to identify the pelvic floor muscles.
- Involuntary loss or leakage of urine, feces, or gas.
- Difficulty urinating or having a bowel movement.
- Visible prolapse of pelvic organs.
- Uncontrolled pelvic pain.



For more information on the 2023 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline on the Management of Pregnancy, visit <https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/WH/up/> or <https://www.health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Access-Cost-Quality-and-Safety/VADOD-CPGs>