

Pelvic floor exercise during pregnancy and after delivery

The pelvic floor, or pelvic diaphragm, consists of a group of muscles which span from the pubic bone to the tailbone. This group forms the base of the pelvis and supports your genital organs. During pregnancy and birth the pelvic floor weakens and is stretched in a similar manner as in a sporting injury. The extent of this stretching depends on the influence of hormones, the weight of the baby and the course of events of the delivery itself. A weakened or unfit pelvic floor can, amongst other things, lead to urinary incontinence when coughing, sneezing, laughing or during other forms of physical exertion. Through clenching exercises you can build up the muscles again and by doing so prevent, minimise or cure urinary incontinence. It is important to train these muscles even if you gave birth via Caeser Section.

A few minutes training each day makes a big difference!

Stage 1

Begin by lying in a relaxed position on your back, or side, with bent legs. Relax your thighs, stomach and backside. Tighten the muscles around your rectum and continue forwards around the vagina and urethra as though you are trying to prevent yourself from going to the toilet. Try to create a feeling of trying to lift up something in your genitalia.

Clench with measured exertion for 2 seconds and then relax for 2 seconds. Repeat this exercise 5 to 10 times. Practice these clenches at least twice a day until you can manage 10 sets in a row.

These clenches are the start of your pelvic floor training. They are called Identifying Clenches. It can be difficult to first isolate and then hold these contractions following the delivery. In the beginning it's good enough to just be able to locate your pelvic floor muscles and to feel that you are tightening them. Once you are able to manage 10 clenches in a row you can move on to Stage 2 where you begin to increase the power of the contractions.

Stage 2

Continue lying in a relaxed position, as in Stage 1. Clench as hard as you can for 5 seconds, then relax for 5 seconds. Start off by doing 2-3 clenches in a row.

Once you feel you can clench as hard as you possibly can, you can increase the number of contractions. It is important that you feel that you can manage to squeeze with 'full power' each time. When you feel you have become stronger you can gradually increase to 10 sets, maintaining the same intervals.

To strengthen your pelvic floor it is important to do these strength-based exercises. They are called Max-Constrictions or Strength-Constrictions.

Later, once you have become stronger you can do the exercises whilst sitting, standing or even walking. Practice at least twice a day and do the exercises in both Stage 1 and Stage 2 when strengthening your pelvic floor. It takes approximately 2-4 months. After this practice at least once a day for 6-12 months. You can then move on and focus more on Stages 3 and 4.

Stage 3

In order to help prevent any fast increases in pressure on your genitalia which can lead to urinary leakage when sneezing or laughing it is important to practice 'speed training'.

Quickly contract the pelvic floor, for no more than 3 seconds at a time. Relax for just as long. Repeat this exercise ten times. If you do this exercise once a day you will increase both your strength and stamina.

Stage 4

If you experience problems with leakage after doing a strenuous activity for a moment, it can be a good idea to train your stamina.

Clench (at about half the strength you can manage) and hold it as long as possible. The aim is to be able to clench uninterrupted for 1-2 minutes.

Do these stamina exercises twice a day.

Important to remember

Remember to clench even when lifting, coughing, carrying objects and exercising your stomach muscles.

Avoid strenuous exercise e.g. training at the gym and jogging during the first 3 months. During this time your uterus is healing and your pelvic floor is slowly becoming stronger and more stable.

It is important to check your clenching ability with your midwife. You can do this in conjunction with your postpartum examinations at the maternity clinic. Try to ensure that your exercising is appropriate based at a level you can manage and that it also isn't straining your pelvic floor. If you can't maintain a 'tightness' throughout an exercise session it is a sign that you are straining too much and that you should exercise your pelvic floor more.

Eventually you will remember to do the exercises whilst sitting or standing. To make it easier to remember to do your exercises it can be a good idea to associate your training with your daily activities.

Remember that you have to clench for the rest of your life – It's never too late to start!