

Introduction

Many men may experience urinary leakage caused by a variety of problems and conditions. Some also have difficulty controlling wind or leakage from the bowels. This may be due to weakness of the muscles of the pelvic floor, which have an important function in preventing these troublesome symptoms.

What is Pelvic Floor?

The floor of the pelvis is made up of layers of muscle and other tissues. These layers stretch from the tailbone at the back to the pubic bone in front. A man's pelvic floor supports the bladder and the bowel. The urethra (bladder outlet) and the rectum (back passage) pass through the pelvic floor. The pelvic floor muscles play an important role in bladder and bowel control. The pelvic floor also plays a role in maintaining an erection.

Why the Pelvic Floor Muscles get weak

The pelvic floor muscles can be weakened by:

- Surgery for an enlarged prostate gland
- Continual straining to empty the bowels, usually due to constipation
- Persistent heavy lifting
- A chronic cough, such as smoker's cough or chronic bronchitis and asthma
- Being overweight
- Lack of general fitness

Neurological damage (e.g. after a stroke or spinal injury, or resulting from other neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis) can also result in poor pelvic floor muscle function. People in this group should seek advice from a healthcare professional.

Pelvic Floor exercises

You can improve control of your bladder and bowel by doing exercises to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. These exercises may also be used in conjunction with a bladder training programme aimed at improving bladder function in people who experience the urgent need to pass urine frequently and who may not always "make it in time". Bladder training is explained in B&BC's booklet 'A Healthy Bladder'.

How to contract the Pelvic Floor Muscles

The first thing to do is to correctly identify the muscles that need to be exercised.

1. Sit comfortably or lay on your bed with the muscles of your thighs, buttocks and abdomen relaxed.
2. Tighten the ring of muscle around the back passage as if you are trying to control diarrhoea or wind. You should be able to feel the muscle move. Don't try too hard otherwise you will start to squeeze your buttocks, thighs and/or your tummy muscles inappropriately.
3. Now imagine trying to draw your penis inside your body to shorten it, whilst at the same time lifting your scrotum upwards towards your tummy button. If your technique is correct, each time that you tighten your pelvic floor muscles you may feel a dip at the base of your penis, and scrotum move up slightly.

If you are unable to feel a definite squeeze and lift action of your pelvic floor muscles, you should seek professional help to get your pelvic floor muscles working correctly - see the final section of this factsheet. Even men with very weak pelvic floor muscles can be taught these exercises by a physiotherapist or continence advisor with expertise in this area.

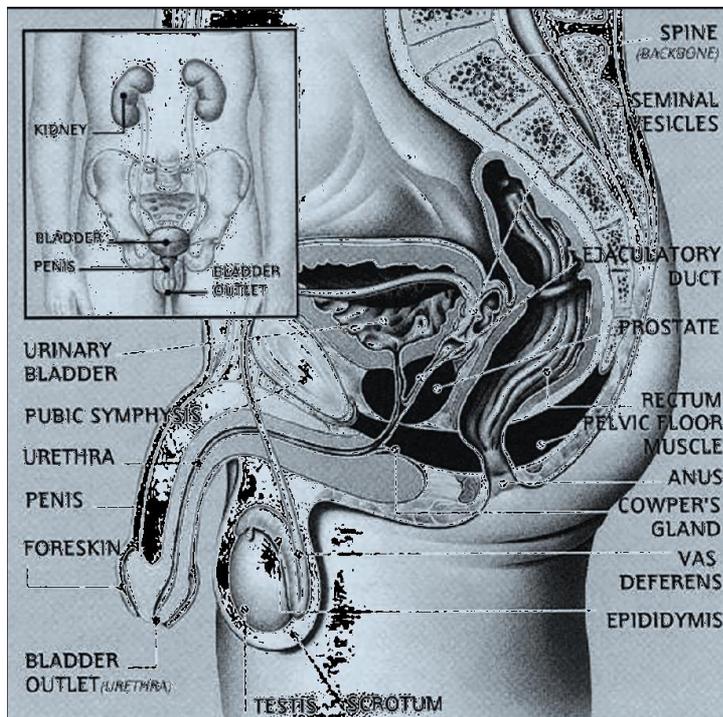
Doing Pelvic Floor exercises

Now you can find your pelvic floor muscles, here are the exercises to do:

1. Your pelvic floor muscles need to have stamina. To train for improved endurance sit stand or lie with your knees slightly apart. Gradually tighten and pull in the pelvic floor muscles. Keep shortening and lifting them for as long as you can. Rest for 4 seconds and then repeat the contraction. Build up your ability and strength until you can do 10 slow contractions at a time, holding them for 10seconds each with rests of 4 seconds in between.
2. Your pelvic floor muscles also need to react quickly to sudden stresses from coughing, laughing or exercise that puts pressure on the bladder. Practice some quick contractions, drawing in the pelvic floor quickly and strongly and then holding it for a few seconds before relaxing. If you are sneezing or coughing, you need to be able to squeeze quickly as well as holding onto the squeeze until the sneeze or cough has subsided.

Aim to do a set of both slow contractions (exercise 1) and quick contractions (exercise 2) at least 3 times each day.

It takes time for exercise to improve muscles function. You are unlikely to notice any improvement for several weeks, so stick at it! You will need to exercise regularly for at least 3 months before the muscles gain their full strength.



Make the exercises a daily routine

Once you have learnt how to do these exercises, they should be done regularly, giving each set your full attention. It may be helpful to have regular times during the day for doing the exercises; for example, after going to the toilet, when having a drink, when lying in bed.

Also you need to tighten your pelvic floor muscles while you are getting up from a chair, coughing or lifting. Some men find that tightening before they do such things helps them to regain control.

Remember good results take time. In order to rehabilitate your pelvic floor muscles you will need to work hard at these exercises. You may not notice an improvement for several weeks and you will not reach your maximum performance for a few months.

When you have recovered control of your bladder or bowel you should continue doing the exercises twice a day for life.

Other tips to help your Pelvic Floor

- Share the lifting of heavy loads
- Avoid constipation and prevent any straining during a bowel movement
- Seek medical advice for hay fever, asthma and bronchitis to reduce sneezing and coughing
- Keep your weight within the right range for your height and age

Seeking help

To achieve your best results you may need to seek help from a specialist physiotherapist or continence advisor. They will have a range of treatments available that can help you learn how to improve your pelvic floor muscles functions.

You can get the details of your nearest Continence Clinic by phoning B&BC or visiting our website. Our contact details are below.

Prostate problems

B&BC also has a fact sheet on 'Your Prostate and You' which gives information and advice on prostate concerns

Bladder and Bowel Community

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