

PELVIC MUSCLE (KEGEL) EXERCISES

Hints and Helps for Patients (Women and Men)

WHAT ARE PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES?

Pelvic muscles hold your bladder and bowel "in place". In women, they also support the uterus (womb). Pelvic muscles can be weakened by common life events -- straining repeatedly to empty your bladder or bowels, being overweight, having a baby, etc. Often, when the pelvic floor muscles are weak, you may have problems with losing urine when you cough or sneeze or exercise.

WHAT ARE PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLE (PME) EXERCISES?

Luckily, when these muscles do get weak, you can help make them strong again. Pelvic floor exercises (sometimes called Kegel's exercises) are done to strengthen the muscles located around the opening of the bladder and the bowel.

Just like your other muscles in your body, exercises can make your pelvic floor muscles stronger. Doing the exercises correctly and regularly can strengthen the muscles. Stronger muscles can lead to little or no urine loss for many women and for some men. They are risk-free, low-cost and painless!

HOW DO I DO THEM?

Like many exercises, these take a little extra practice at the beginning. It is very important that you perform these exercises correctly.

Getting Started:

The **first step** is finding the right muscles. It may take several tries. In fact, many of us start out squeezing the wrong muscles. To locate the muscles, it is best to sit down.

Imagine that you are trying to stop passing gas or having a bowel motion. Squeeze the muscles you would use. These muscles are part of the same group that controls the opening of the bladder.

It is important to exercise the right muscles. It can be helpful to work with a doctor or nurse who can teach you the correct technique. For men, you may feel your penis pull in slightly toward your body. For women, you (or your doctor or nurse) can check. Lie down and put a finger inside your vagina.

Squeeze the pelvic muscles. When you feel pressure around your finger, you know you are using the correct muscle. See your health care provider if you have any difficulty identifying these muscles.

The **next step**, once you have found the right muscles, is to try to keep everything relaxed except these muscles. *Be careful not to hold your breath or tighten the muscles in your buttocks or abdomen.* Squeezing the wrong muscles can put more pressure on your bladder control muscles. Breathe slowly and deeply while you do the exercises.

Final step is to find a quiet spot to practice — usually your bathroom or bedroom — so you can concentrate. To start, you may want to lie down or sit down with your knees apart.

Getting into the Routine

Be sure you are doing the exercises correctly before you start. Remember to imagine that you're trying to stop from passing urine or gas.

1. Pull in or "squeeze" the pelvic muscles.
2. Hold the squeeze for a slow count of 3 (1-and-2-and-3).
3. Relax for a count of 1-and-2-and 3.
4. Repeat, but don't overdo it. Each repeat of squeezing and then relaxing is one repetition.

Every day, you can do either

- two "sets" of repetitions for 5 minutes each or
- four or five "sets" of 10-15 repetitions per set.

Either of these plans will reach the *target* of at least 50 repetitions per day.

We recommend gradually "working up" to the full series of exercises. At first, you may not be able to hold the squeeze continuously for a slow count of 3 or to do the exercises for a full set of 10 or a whole 5 minutes.

With practice, it will become easier as the muscles get stronger. As you get better, you might try increasing the "squeeze" count to 5 and the relax count to 5. Be patient to see results. Don't give up. Remember it's just a few minutes, a few times each day.

WHERE AND WHEN SHOULD I DO THE EXERCISES?

What usually works best is regular sessions, "built in" to your schedule at regular times each day. Many people report that 5 minutes before they get up in the morning and 5 minutes before they sleep is a helpful routine. At the

beginning, it usually does not work as well to try and remember to do them whenever you think of it.

Once you are "in the routine", it then can help to do extra exercises with other activities, such as watching television, ironing, or relaxing.

You might want to try adding the so-called "quick Kegel" when you are doing these other activities. In performing the "quick Kegel", the pelvic muscles are rapidly tightened and relaxed 10 times.

HOW LONG DO I HAVE TO DO THE EXERCISES?

It usually takes from 6-12 weeks for most women or men to notice a change in urine loss.

Once you have attained your goal, you can do the exercises for 5 minutes, 3 times a week. If you start having problems again with urine loss, you may need to go back to the practice routine of several times each day.

Like most exercises, these may be most helpful if they become a lifelong practice. Regular periodic follow-ups with your physician will assess the benefits of these exercises as well as provide the opportunity to review your exercise technique.

Beware the Sneeze!!

You can protect yourself and your pelvic muscles by bracing yourself before sudden pressure from actions such as sneezing, lifting, or jumping.

Try to think ahead: Just before, squeeze your pelvic muscles tightly and hold on until after you sneeze, lift, or jump. "Hold the squeeze 'til after the sneeze." After you train yourself to tighten the pelvic muscles for these moments, you may have fewer accidents where you lose urine.

Self-Care Strategies to help reduce leaking of urine:

- Practice double-voiding: empty your bladder as much as possible, relax for a minute, and try again.
- Wear clothing that is easy to remove (e.g., pants with an elastic waistband).
- Use absorbent undergarments or a pad to help capture leaking urine. Look for products that help control odors. Take good care of the skin around the genital area.

- For women: (1) Cross your legs to stop urine leakage from coughing, sneezing, or laughing. (2) Insert a tampon when exercising.
- Retrain your bladder by urinating on a schedule that gradually increases the time between trips to the bathroom.

If your symptoms do not improve, ask your doctor. Also, if you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact the doctor, nurse, or therapist who is helping you with the exercise plan.

HELPFUL HINTS:

1. Listening to music when you do the exercises can make it more fun!
2. Once you are "in the routine", you can do the exercises while doing other things, such as driving, watching television or making dinner.
3. Remember **not** to regularly do pelvic floor exercises while you're urinating. This could actually weaken the muscles.
4. Keep a calendar and give yourself a checkmark or star each time you do the exercises. This will help you keep track of your program and remind you when you forget.
5. If you do stop doing the exercises, start again! Just remember, it takes regular practice to see positive results.

Adapted from -

Internet resources:

- The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 1996;
- Mayo Clinic Health Letter, January 1998;
- Kegel Exercises for Urinary Incontinence. Department of Nursing; Children's and Women's Services/OB-GYN Patient Education Committee. Iowa Health Book: Obstetrics and Gynecology; August 1997.

Booklet:

- Skelly J, Eyles P, Boblin-Cummings S, Davis H. Promoting Continence Care in Canada. McMaster Univ Bookstore; ISBN 1-894088-06-9.



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