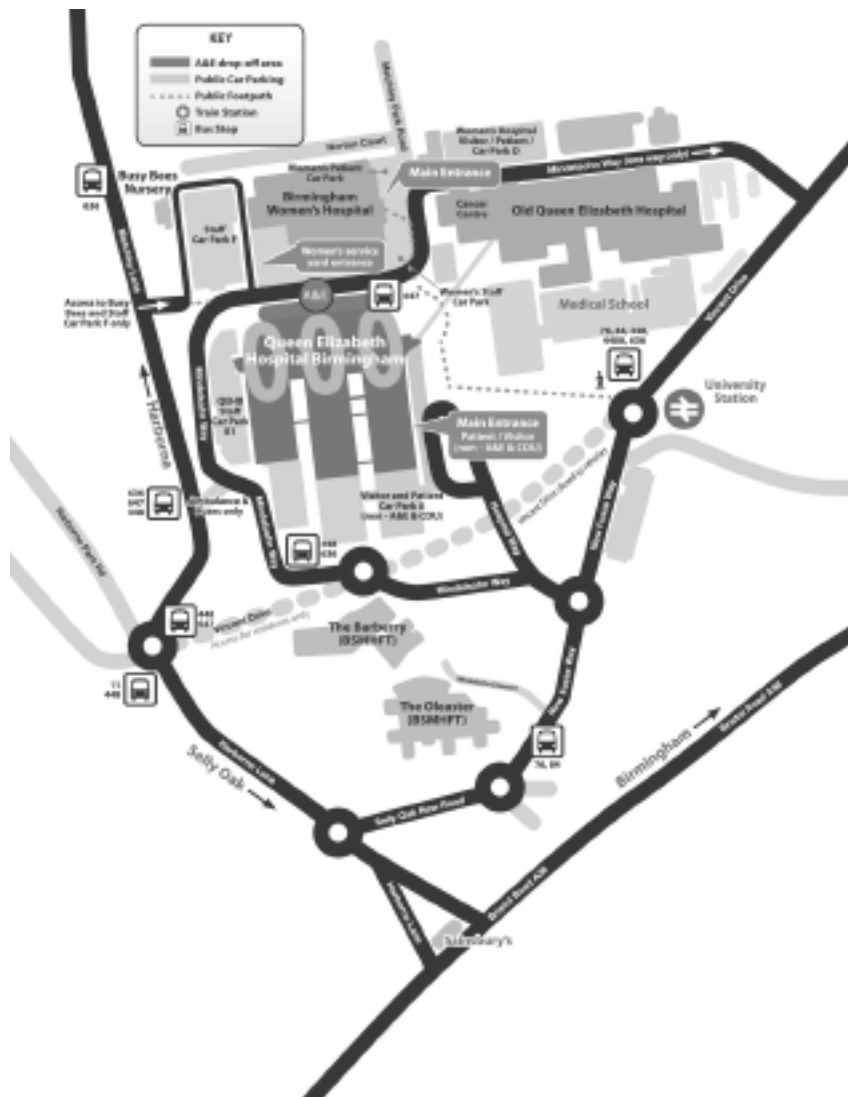


# *Information and Advice for Patients with Pelvic Floor Weakness*



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**Physiotherapy Department**

## Introduction

You have been referred to this department for treatment and advice because you have symptoms, which may include leakage of urine when you cough, laugh or sneeze. (this is stress incontinence) or because of a prolapse of the vaginal walls.

Maybe you have to rush to the toilet at the first signal and perhaps not get there in time. This is urgency and urge incontinence.

You may also be going to the toilet more frequently than usual. You may have noticed some lack of control in the back passage and sexual activity may be uncomfortable, you may even feel that you have lost all control.

**All these symptoms indicate that there could be a problem with the muscles which form the Pelvic Floor.**

## The key to continuing success with pelvic floor exercises

- OVERLOAD** Maximum voluntary contraction, repeated as many times as possible with a 4 second rest in between. When you reach 10 max voluntary contractions each lasting 10 seconds then reduce the rest time in between.
- KNACK** By contracting pelvic floor before and during a cough or any increase in abdominal pressure urine loss can be reduced by 73% within 1 week of practise.
- MAINTENANCE** Muscle training can improve strength, power and endurance but to maintain the improvement the exercise needs to be continued on a regular basis or your symptoms will return. If you stop, the muscle will reduce in strength, power and endurance within 4-6 weeks. Endurance reducing most quickly

*Exercising your pelvic floor daily is essential!*

## A few tips on:

### Perineal Care

1. If you are continually damp, or menopausal, this can cause soreness. Wearing the wrong type of pad can aggravate this. Seek advice about what is best for you.
2. Bath and shower regularly. Don't avoid having baths in preference to showers, only avoid hot baths. (Even during a thunderstorm the underside of the Marble Arch never gets wet!)
3. Avoid harsh rubbing to dry. Pat gently instead.
4. Do not use scented soap, bath additives or personal sprays.
5. Always wipe from front to back.
6. Wear cotton underwear if possible and avoid tight jeans or leggings.
7. Choose stockings rather than tights.

### General Advice

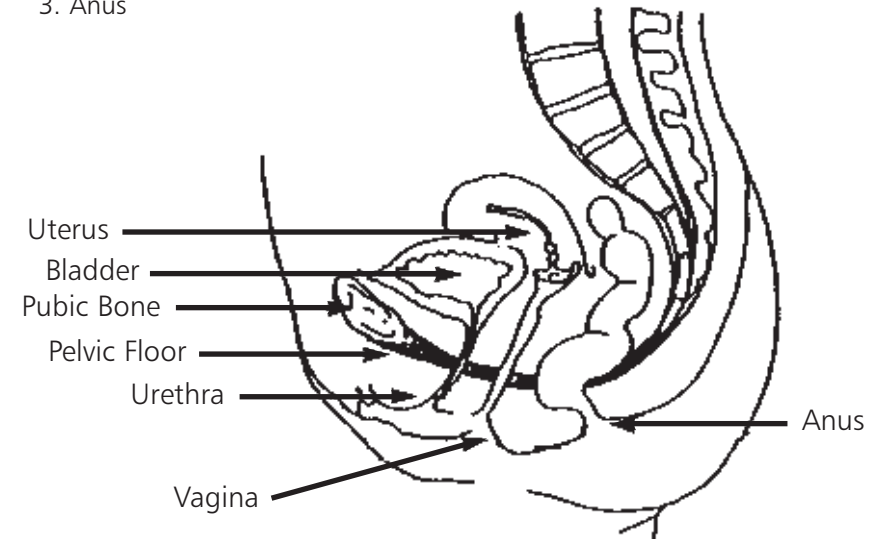
1. Exercise regularly
2. Reduce caffeine and alcohol intake
3. Seek medical advice about HRT and other medication
4. Stop smoking
5. Check your diet.  
Eat a well balanced diet but one that will help with weight loss if appropriate, and avoid constipation.
6. Don't give up.

**Go on,  
make your Pelvic Floor muscles happy -  
Give them a squeeze!**

## Pelvic Floor Muscles

The pelvic floor is the hammock of muscles, which spans the pelvis from front to back and is responsible for supporting all the pelvic organs and controlling the openings. In women these are:

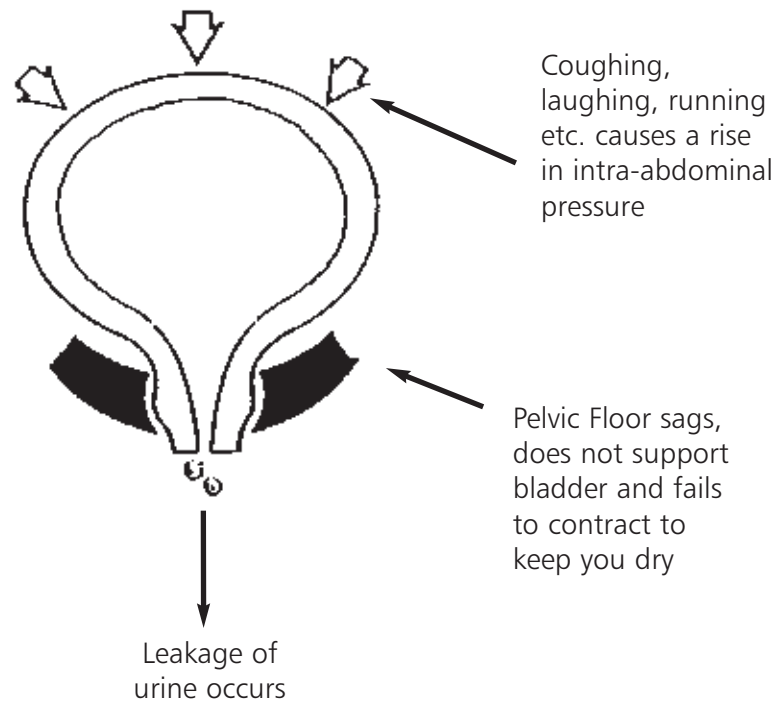
1. Urethra
2. Vagina
3. Anus



These muscles are usually firm and slightly tense to prevent leakage from the bladder and bowel and to maintain the normal position of organs, i.e. preventing a prolapse.

When you empty your bladder or bowel the muscles relax but then tighten again to restore control. The muscles can get gradually weaker, possibly over several years due to:

- childbirth
- chronic constipation
- being overweight
- natural aging
- menopause and reduction of oestrogen
- having an occupation or interest involving lifting
- being a smoker and having a chronic cough



Do not expect your nighttime symptoms to improve until your daytime symptoms are settling. If you wake up it is better to go and empty your bladder rather than lie awake uncomfortable.

You may have been prescribed medication for this problem by your doctor or consultant. These tablets known as Anticholinergics are very useful and should be persevered with. Occasional side effects such as a dry mouth will subside.

## Summary

1. Don't ever go to the toilet "just in case".
2. Try and hold on for a few moments when you get the urge to go.
3. Aim to drink between 1½ - 2 litres of liquid a day.
4. Avoid tea, coffee, alcohol, coke cola & chocolate.
5. Empty bladder efficiently.

## Summary

1. Exercise regime  
Keep assessing to progress and strengthen
2. Be realistic. Don't overdo it. Muscles can tire and be less efficient for a while
3. Don't expect much progress if you are unwell or having a period.
4. Anticipate leakage and prepare pelvic floor muscles just before coughing etc. to withstand the rise in intra-abdominal pressure

## Bladder Training

If your problem is that you have to respond to the urgency feeling immediately, your bladder is getting in control of you rather than you being in control of your bladder (bladder training can overcome this).

Normally an adult bladder is capable of holding about 20 fluid ounces (500 mls) and is emptied between 3 and 7 times in 24 hours. It is normal for some people, particularly older people, to have to get up at night once to pass water, but more frequently than this, regularly, is not normal.

Usually when the bladder is about 1/2 - 3/4 full it would give the sensation that it needed emptying, but you would decide exactly when and where.

When the bladder is sensitive it can give strong sensations at any time when it should be relaxed, and makes you have to run. To overcome this:

1. Never go to the toilet "just in case" as this teaches the bladder to hold smaller and smaller quantities. When you get the message to go, do a pelvic floor exercise. This will tighten the pelvic floor muscles and help the bladder muscle to relax and help you defer the urgency.
2. Apply perineal pressure. Sit on the edge of a chair or table, or press a rolled up towel against the perineum.
3. Think of something else.
4. Try relaxation techniques.

## Pelvic Floor Exercises

### It is never too late to improve.

Correct exercise performed regularly can strengthen these muscles.

Once you have attended for an initial assessment of your condition and problem, you will be taught how to exercise correctly.

The following tips may help:

1. Imagine that you are trying to stop passing wind or diarrhoea. Tighten around your back passage and feel the muscles move.
2. Imagine you are passing urine and tighten the muscles around the front passage as if to stop midstream.
3. Now do 1 and 2 together. Tighten around the back passage and think about moving the contraction forwards to include the front passage. Imagine the squeeze and upward lift, which this will produce. Hold the contraction for a few moments then relax completely before trying again.

**Make sure you do not tighten your buttocks, breathe in, hold your legs together or tighten your tummy muscles. If you do any of these things you are not exercising correctly.**

To check you are doing the correct exercises you can do several things:

1. Self Examination: Wash your hands prior to the examination. When you are lying warm and comfortable in bed or a bath, gently insert your index and middle fingers into your vagina. Close your eyes and concentrate and try to squeeze your fingers with the muscles surrounding them. If you cannot feel anything, try pressing backwards and try again. If exercising correctly you should feel an inward and upward movement.
2. If you have been given a vaginal probe with indicator stick, do use this, as it will give you a clear visual indication that you are contacting your pelvic floor muscles.
3. During sexual intercourse, squeeze on your partner's penis. He will be able to feel the squeeze and reassure you that the correct muscles are working.

Partners often like to be of help to you to overcome this problem and in this way they can be.

## Practicing Your Exercises

Depending on your initial condition you will be advised about your exercise regime and progression programme. Everyone is different so we start with what you can do now.

- Now that you can do the basic pelvic floor exercise, you can use it to gradually tone up your muscles.

### How many to do

- Start with what you can do now  
How many seconds can you hold the squeeze for?  
(maximum of 10 seconds)
- How many times can you repeat this?  
(Up to a maximum of 10,  
resting for 4 seconds between squeezes).
- Squeeze and lift more firmly and let go quickly.  
How many of these quick squeezes can you do?
- Now that you know what your “starting block” is try to do this starting block 4 to 6 times a day.  
(For example, a 5-second squeeze repeated 5 times, plus 5 quick squeezes).

### The Knack

- Remember to squeeze your pelvic floor as you cough, sneeze, run or lift.

Your progression will be monitored and you will be advised accordingly throughout your rehabilitation programme.

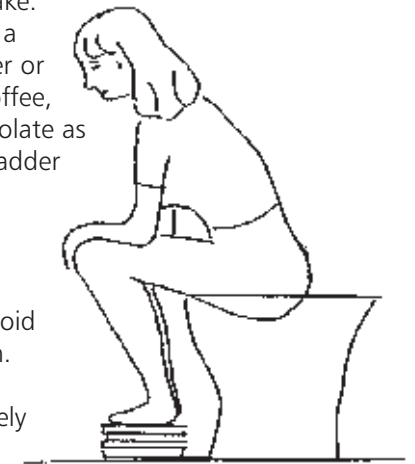
**Exercises should be practiced throughout the day, in any position, - lying standing, sitting, kneeling.**

Remembering to do the exercises can be difficult at first so the following tips may help you:

1. Identify activities you do regularly, such as answering the telephone, listening to news bulletins on the radio, unlocking or locking doors, watering plants etc. and do the exercises as you do these activities.
2. When you have emptied your bladder or bowels and are washing your hands, do your exercises.
3. Anticipate the leakage and tighten your muscles just before coughing, laughing, lifting etc. Usually the pelvic floor contracts reflexly, automatically, just before a cough or sneeze, or any activity likely to raise the intra-abdominal pressure. When the pelvic floor muscle is weak, this reflex contraction is reduced or lost and leakage occurs. This is when you can learn to recognise when to tighten the pelvic floor and brace against the pressure rising in your abdomen. It is another opportunity to exercise and use the muscles in a functional way and so re-educate them.

## Do's and Don'ts

1. Do not cut down on your fluid intake. Aim to drink between 1½ - 2 litres a day, most of which should be water or fruit juice. Avoid too much tea, coffee, fizzy drinks (ie coke cola) and chocolate as these contain caffeine, a known bladder irritant.
2. **Don't Strain**  
Eat a well balanced diet to control any weight problem and also to avoid constipation and the need to strain.
3. Try to empty your bladder completely each time you go, and don't go “just in case”.



4. Sit, as illustrated, lining the toilet seat if you prefer, but don't hover.