

## Pelvic Floor Weakness

# Symptoms of a weak pelvic floor

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Difficulty controlling wind and bowel urgency



Incontinence with exercise, coughing or sneezing



Bladder Urgency and racing to the toilet



Vaginal heaviness, bulging or dragging sensations



Lower back and hip pain



Decreased sensation with intercourse and orgasm

### What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles and connective tissues that sit at the base of your pelvis. These muscles support the bladder, bowel and (in women) the uterus. They help control bladder and bowel function and play a role in sexual function and core stability.

### What is pelvic floor weakness?

Pelvic floor weakness occurs when these muscles are not working as strongly or effectively as they should. This can lead to problems with bladder or bowel control, pelvic organ support and reduced confidence with daily activities.

### **Common symptoms**

You may experience one or more of the following:

- Leaking urine when coughing, sneezing, laughing or exercising (stress incontinence)
- Urgency to pass urine or difficulty holding on
- Difficulty controlling wind or bowel movements
- A feeling of heaviness, dragging or bulge in the vagina or rectum
- Reduced sensation during sexual intercourse
- Lower back or pelvic discomfort

### **Causes and risk factors**

Pelvic floor weakness can affect both women and men. Common causes include:

- Pregnancy and childbirth (especially forceps, vacuum delivery or prolonged labour)
- Ageing and menopause
- Chronic coughing (e.g. asthma, smoking-related cough)
- Constipation and straining
- Heavy lifting or high-impact exercise
- Obesity
- Pelvic or prostate surgery
- Reduced physical activity or prolonged sitting

### **How is it diagnosed?**

A healthcare professional (such as a physiotherapist or GP) will usually diagnose pelvic floor weakness based on:

- Your symptoms and medical history
- A physical examination (with your consent)
- Sometimes bladder or bowel diaries

### **Treatment options**

Pelvic floor weakness is common and often improves with the right treatment.

### **1. Pelvic floor muscle exercises (PFME)**

These are the main treatment and are often very effective when done correctly and regularly.

- Exercises aim to improve strength, endurance and coordination
- Results usually take 8–12 weeks
- A specialist physiotherapist can ensure you are contracting the correct muscles

### **2. Lifestyle advice**

- Avoid constipation: drink fluids and eat fibre
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Reduce heavy lifting where possible
- Manage chronic cough or breathing problems
- Limit bladder irritants such as caffeine and fizzy drinks if symptoms are severe

### **3. Bladder and bowel retraining**

- Timed toileting
- Avoid 'just in case' toilet visits
- Improve bowel habits and positioning

### **4. Other treatments (if needed)**

- Vaginal pessaries (for prolapse)
- Electrical stimulation or biofeedback (guided by specialists)
- Medications (in selected cases)
- Surgery (only when conservative treatment has not helped)

### **Pelvic floor exercise guidance (basic)**

Try to imagine stopping wind and lifting the muscles inside the pelvis upwards.

- Tighten and lift the pelvic floor
- Hold for up to 5–10 seconds (as able), then relax fully
- Repeat 5–10 times
- Perform quick squeezes as well as slow holds

- Aim to do exercises 3 times per day

Do not tighten your tummy, buttocks or hold your breath.

### **When to seek help**

Speak to a healthcare professional if:

- Symptoms are affecting your daily life or confidence
- You have pain, bleeding or a noticeable bulge
- Symptoms are not improving after 3 months of regular exercises

### **Key messages**

- Pelvic floor weakness is common and treatable
- Exercises are safe and effective when done correctly
- Early advice and treatment can prevent symptoms from worsening

If you have concerns or questions, your physiotherapist, GP or specialist nurse can provide further support and guidance.