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Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

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For pelvic floor strengthening exercises to be effective, it is VITAL that you perform a pelvic floor contraction (PFC) correctly. The muscles have a drawing in and lifting up effect. You can check this using a mirror, or by inserting a clean (or gloved) finger or two into the vagina and then pulling up.

Secondly, make sure you are only using your pelvic floor. Your stomach, legs and buttocks should all be relaxed. Otherwise you will increase the pressure in your abdomen and strain your pelvic floor.

Pelvic floor contractions (Kegels) can be done in any position, but try sitting on a chair with your legs slightly apart and your elbows resting on your knees. This position gives you good feedback as you lift your pelvic floor off the chair.

How to do the exercises

To do a Kegel correctly, pull up the muscles around your bladder, vagina and anus. You should feel a lifting up effect. DO NOT HOLD YOUR BREATH, and count how many seconds you can hold before you feel the muscles letting go. As soon as you feel them tiring, let go. Make a mental note of how long you held for. This differs for every woman: it may be 2, 5, 8 or even 10 seconds. After 10 seconds the muscles will be tired, even in young women with excellent pelvic floor strength.

Rest for about 5 to 10 seconds between each contraction. Then repeat, holding for the same length of time as the first one. Keep going (rest, contract, rest, contract) until you can no longer hold for the same length of time.

For example, you may hold the first contraction for 8 seconds and manage 5 of them, but the 6th you can only hold for 6 seconds before it tires. Your exercise routine would then be 5 contractions, each held for 8 seconds. Also see how many quick contractions you can do before you notice tiredness. If you can do 6, your full routine would be: 5 contractions held for 8 seconds, plus 6 quick contractions.

Do this at least 3 times a day. Finding several times a day to do the exercises well WILL be much more effective than trying to do them all day alongside other activities. Over the following weeks you will find that you can still hold for 8 seconds but can now do 7 of them. After a few more weeks you might still manage 7 but can now hold for 9 seconds. And so it goes on.

Pelvic floor rehabilitation takes many months. Most women show considerable improvement within 6 months. It is also worth learning to brace your pelvic floor by tightening the muscles every time you cough, sneeze, laugh or lift anything heavy (more than about 4.5kg or 10lbs). This becomes automatic after a while.

What NICE and the NHS recommend

NICE recommends pelvic floor muscle training as the first treatment for stress urinary incontinence and pelvic floor problems, with a supervised programme of at least 3 months that includes at least 8 contractions performed 3 times a day. The NHS also recommends the free Squeezy app, developed by NHS physiotherapists, to remind you to do your exercises and keep track of your progress.

Measuring your progress

To get really good feedback, it is worth measuring your pelvic floor strength with a perineometer, which shows when your muscles are tiring. Most patients find this very helpful

in improving the quality of their contractions. We can do this for you at the clinic about once a month if you wish.

The important thing is to work your pelvic floor like any other muscle you want to build up: at your own pace. Whether you can hold for 2 seconds or 10, do not overdo it. If you are sore after doing Kegels, you HAVE overdone it.

Also be aware that women who are breastfeeding can have lower pelvic floor tone than those who have weaned. We do not advocate early weaning to improve pelvic floor tone, but some women find their tone improves naturally once their hormone levels return to normal.

Our female healthcare philosophy

At the Women's Natural Health Clinic, we specialise in comprehensive natural reproductive, gynaecological, obstetric and general healthcare for women from adolescence to post-menopause. We integrate oriental and western medical diagnosis to create a naturally oriented treatment plan combining herbal medicine, naturopathic medicine, acupuncture, nutritional therapy, exercise and lifestyle, tailored to each woman.

To book an appointment, visit womensnaturalhealthclinic.com/book or call 020 3811 8778.