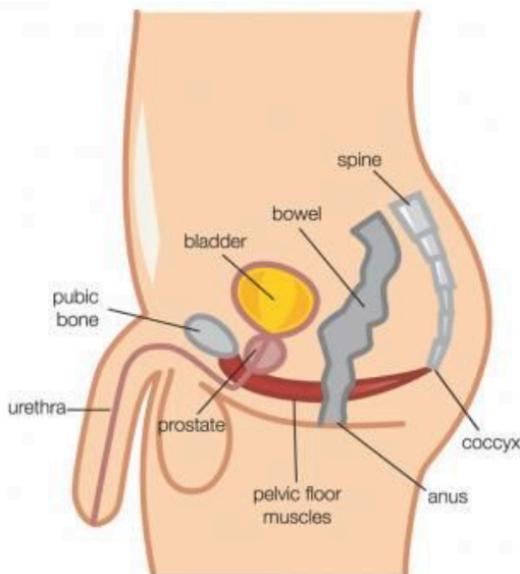


Pelvic floor exercises in men:

What is the pelvic floor?

Many men experience problems with their urinary system leading to unwanted leakage of urine. Some also have difficulty controlling wind or leakage from the lower bowel. Often this is due to weakness of the muscles of the pelvic floor which have an important function in preventing these problems.

The floor of the pelvis is made up of muscle layers stretching from the tail bone (coccyx) at the back to the pubic bone in front. A man's pelvic floor supports the bladder and bowel. The urethra (water pipe) and the rectum (back passage) pass through the pelvic floor muscles (see the diagram).



Why do the pelvic floor muscles get weak?

The pelvic floor can be weakened by:

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

Can I do anything to strengthen my pelvic floor before and after prostate surgery?

Yes, pelvic floor exercises are useful for many men prior to prostate surgery. They ensure that the muscles holding urine in the bladder are in the best possible condition. The stronger the pelvic floor muscles are before surgery, the less likely it is that there will be any urinary incontinence after the operation.

If urinary incontinence occurs after surgery pelvic floor exercises are the key to improving the level and shortening the duration of the incontinence. The exercises should be started from the time the incontinence is first noticed , and should be continued until it has resolved.

How do I contract the pelvic floor muscles?

The first thing you need to do is to identify the muscles that need to be exercised:

- Sit, lie or stand comfortably with the muscles of your thighs, buttock and abdomen relaxed
- Tighten the ring of muscle around the back passage as if you are trying to control diarrhoea or wind. Relax the muscle again. Practice this movement several times until you are sure you are exercising the correct muscles. Try not to squeeze you buttocks, tighten your thighs or contract your tummy muscles.
- Another way of thinking about the technique is to imagine you are passing urine. Tighten the muscles as if you are trying to stop the flow in mid-stream.
- Anyone watching while you are doing pelvic floor exercises shouldn't be able to tell you are doing them at all because the rest of your body should be relaxed.
- While doing pelvic floor exercise avoid:
 - Contracting your abdominal muscles or buttocks
 - Squeezing your legs together

If your technique is correct, you will feel the base of your penis move upwards slightly towards your tummy. You can test your technique 'for real' by contracting your pelvic floor while passing urine. If you can slow or stop the flow of urine by contracting the muscles, your technique is correct. **Do not test your technique by stopping the flow of urine more than once a week as it may interfere with normal bladder emptying.**

What is the recommended exercise programme?

One set of exercises consists of the following:

1. Contract your pelvic floor as firmly as possible and hold for 10 seconds. Relax for 3 seconds. Do this 10 times.
2. Rest for 1-2 minutes.
3. Contract your pelvic floor as firmly as possible and hold for 1 second. Relax for 3 seconds. Do this 10 times.

You should perform 3 sets of exercises every day.

Spread the 3 sets out through the day.

1. Do the first set while laying on your back in bed after waking in the morning
2. Do the second set while sitting in the middle of the day eg. while eating lunch
3. Do the third set while standing in the evening

Muscles only develop when you challenge them to work harder than normal. This will be different for everyone.

Develop a habit of bracing your pelvic floor muscles gently during everyday activities (lifting, carrying and during strenuous exercise) and particularly during any task which might challenge the bladder or put pressure through the pelvis.

Do not do the exercises by using the pelvic floor muscles to stop and start the flow of urine except to occasionally test your technique (once a week) as it may interfere with normal bladder emptying.

Like any muscle exercise, it takes time to strengthen the pelvic floor. The weaker the pelvic floor was before surgery, the longer it will take to strengthen after surgery. Please keep doing the exercises even if you don't notice any improvement in continence after the first few months. Pelvic floor exercises are crucial to regaining full continence. Only 0.5% of men are unable to regain urinary continence by doing exercises after surgery. In these cases it might be appropriate to consider a continence procedure but this would only be considered following specialist investigation and after at least 9-12 months of doing regular pelvic floor exercises.