

Pelvic Floor Exercises

Pelvic floor or Kegel exercises were developed by Arnold Kegel in the 1940s in an effort to improve those symptoms associated with stress incontinence. Within 10 years Kegel was describing a greater than 90% success rate of this approach revolutionising the treatment of this troublesome condition. Although Kegel's exercises were based around the use of a device placed in the vagina, in the modern era sufferers are instructed in contraction of a particular set of muscles (bulbocavernosus). The greatest difficulty usually encountered is the identification of the correct muscle groups. It is said up to 50% of patients fail on this front from verbal instruction alone. The main problem being a tendency to increase the pressure within the abdomen and/or contract the abdominal, buttock or thigh muscles instead. There remains, therefore, a role for devices to help (particularly) women isolate the correct muscle group and aid in the discipline required to perform these repetitive (and boring) exercises. For those with mild stress incontinence, Kegel's exercises are an extremely effective approach. Initial success with this treatment can mean an avoidance of surgery in up to 2/3 of sufferers in the long-term. However, for those with severe incontinence, with or without significant prolapse, surgical intervention is likely to be the most effective approach.

Identifying the muscles

1. Sit or lie comfortably with muscles of your thighs, buttocks and abdomen relaxed
2. Tighten the ring of muscle around the back passage as if you were trying to control diarrhoea or wind. Relax it. Practice this movement several times until you are sure you are exercising the correct muscle. Try not to squeeze your buttocks or tighten your thighs or tummy muscles.
3. Imagine you are passing urine, trying to stop the flow mid-stream, then restarting it. You should feel a definite squeeze and lift action as the muscles are tightened.

Doing the exercises

Now that you can feel the muscles working, you can start exercising them.

1. Tighten and draw in strongly the muscles around the anus and the urethra all at once. Lift them up inside. Try to hold this contraction strongly for 5 seconds, then relax.
2. Repeat the 'squeeze and lift' and relax.
3. Repeat this as many times as you can up to a maximum of 8 – 10 squeezes. Make each tightening a strong, slow and controlled contraction.
4. Now do 5 to 10 short, fast and strong contractions, pulling up and immediately letting go.
5. Do this whole exercise at least 4 – 5 times a day. It is probably beneficial if the exercises are performed in different positions e.g. lying, standing, sitting and even walking.

REMEMBER

When doing the exercises,

DO NOT hold your breath

DO NOT push down instead of squeezing and lifting

DO NOT tighten your tummy, buttocks or thighs

These exercises can and should become part of your daily routine. It is important to perform the exercises 5 or so times a day AND give them your full attention. Fewer well-performed exercises are better than many half-hearted ones.