

Patient information factsheet

Pelvic floor exercises

A guide for women with cystic fibrosis

What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor consists of layers of muscles that extend from the tail bone at the base of your spine to the pubic bone at the front. These muscles support the womb, bladder and bowel. The urethra, vagina and rectum all pass through the pelvic floor. When these muscles become weak they can cause leaking of urine and leaking from the bowels, as well as difficulty controlling wind and an urgent and frequent need to pass urine. However there are exercises that you can do which will strengthen these muscles (see below).

What causes pelvic floor weakness?

In cystic fibrosis repeated coughing can often weaken the muscles. It can also be caused by persistent strain from activities such as straining to empty bowels when constipated, lifting heavy objects, pregnancy (and child birth), obesity and a general lack of fitness.

Finding your pelvic floor muscles

In order to find and contract your pelvic floor muscles, follow the steps below:

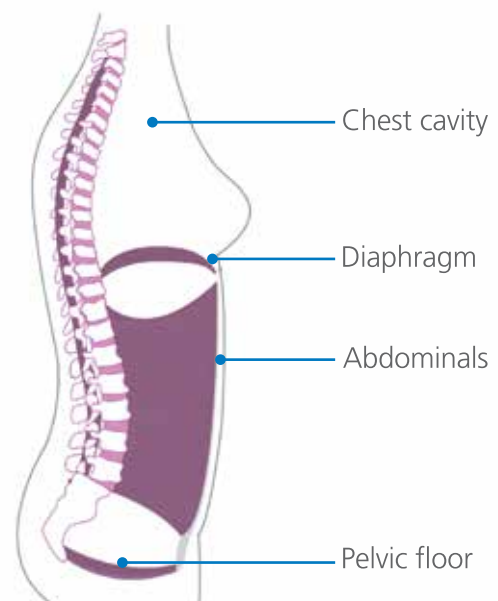
1. Sit or lie in a relaxed and comfortable position
2. Lift your pelvic floor by imagining you're stopping passing diarrhoea or wind
3. Lift the pelvic floor muscles upwards and forwards by imagining you're pulling your tail bone towards the pubic bone
4. Lift the pelvic floor muscles at the front at the same time by imagining you're stopping the flow of urine

Do all of the above without squeezing your buttocks, your thighs or stomach muscles, and without holding your breath.

Pelvic floor exercises

Once you know how to contract your muscles, it's time to start giving them a workout:

1. Contract your pelvic floor and hold for as long as you can. Build up to ten slow contractions, holding each one for up to ten seconds at a time with four seconds rest in between. This will help to improve stamina.
2. Contract your pelvic floor as hard as you can and hold for one second. Repeat ten times in a row. This will help to improve strength.
3. Aim to do a set of slow contractions followed by a set of quick contractions three to four times a day.
4. You should repeat these exercises in a lying, sitting and a standing position.



You could also try the 'knack' technique which involves contracting your pelvic floor muscles before you cough, sneeze, huff or lift anything heavy to help prevent leaking. You should hold the contraction for the duration of the cough, huff or lift. This should become a lifelong habit.

With all of these exercises it's important to maintain a good spinal posture (see *Improving your posture factsheet*). Recovery can take up to six months and once you have strengthened your muscles it's a good idea to continue doing these exercises two to three times a week in order to maintain the strength that you've built up.

Improving bladder control

There are also small adjustments that you can make to your life which will help to improve your bladder control:

- reduce the amount of caffeine you drink as caffeine irritates the bladder. Cut down on cola, tea, coffee, lager, wine and hot chocolate
- on the occasions you do drink caffeine, only have half a cup and then follow it with a glass of water
- replace your caffeine drinks with naturally decaffeinated ones (avoid the artificially decaffeinated versions)
- maintain fluid balance to avoid constipation by drinking eight glasses of water a day
- avoid going to the toilet 'just in case'.

We're here to help

If you have any concerns or questions ask your physiotherapist or doctor for help. Hopefully following this advice and doing the exercises will help you, but a referral to a hospital specialist for investigations or surgery can sometimes be necessary.

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.