

Patient information factsheet

Pelvic floor exercises - a guide for women with cystic fibrosis

This factsheet contains helpful advice and exercises to do at home to help strengthen your pelvic floor muscles.

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 issues, including:

- urine or stool leakage
- difficulty controlling wind
- 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 people with cystic fibrosis, repeated coughing can often weaken the pelvic floor muscles. Pelvic floor weakness can also be caused by persistent strain from factors, such as:

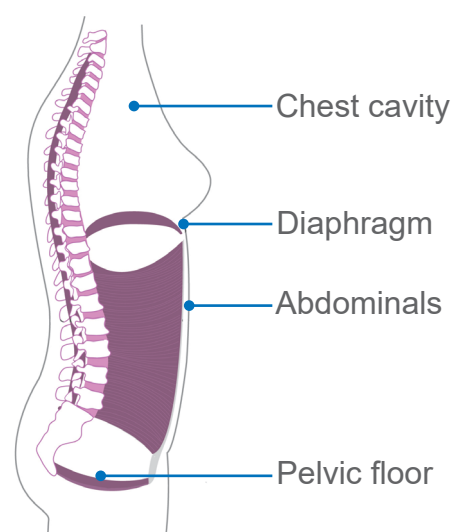
- straining to empty your bowels when constipated
- lifting heavy objects
- pregnancy (and child birth)
- obesity
- a general lack of fitness

Finding your pelvic floor muscles

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 yourself from passing wind.
3. Lift your pelvic floor muscles upwards and forwards by imagining you're pulling your tail bone towards your pubic bone.
4. At the same time, lift your pelvic floor muscles at the front 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.

Slow contractions

- 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 your stamina.

Quick contractions

- 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 your strength.

Aim to do a set of slow contractions, followed by a set of quick contractions, three to four times a day. You should repeat these exercises in a lying, sitting and standing position.

The knack technique

You could also try the 'knack' technique. This technique 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 - a guide for adults with cystic fibrosis' factsheet, which can be found on our website www.uhs.nhs.uk/for-patients/patient-information-leaflets).

Recovery can take up to six months. 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 and fizzy drinks in your diet (including drinks, such as tea, coffee, lager, wine and hot chocolate).
- On the occasions when you do drink caffeine, only drink half a cup of the caffeinated drink and then follow it with a glass of water.
- Replace your caffeinated drinks with naturally decaffeinated ones (avoid the artificially decaffeinated versions).
- Drink plenty of water (eight glasses of water a day) to avoid constipation.
- Avoid going to the toilet 'just in case'.

Further information

If you have any further questions or concerns, contact your physiotherapist or doctor for advice.

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.

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