

## PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLE EXERCISES FOR WOMEN

This handout gives basic information regarding pelvic floor muscle exercises (PFME's). If you follow written advice on this topic, it may not be as effective as an individual programme of PFME's formulated after an examination by a clinician trained in this specialty. During examination, the clinician will ensure you are tightening the correct muscles and estimate the strength of the muscle contraction and how quickly the muscle tires. They will set an individual programme for you to follow, and will supervise the effectiveness of your pelvic floor training programme. Therefore, if you follow the basic advice given here and do not have any improvement in your symptoms after 3 to 4 months, you should ask to be referred to your local Bladder and Bowel service. If the exercises are successful in reducing or curing your symptoms, continue the exercises on a daily basis for life.

### What are PFME's for?

PFME's are carried out to prevent and treat involuntary urinary leakage on effort or exertion, including sporting activities, or on sneezing or coughing. They are also used for people with urinary urgency, with or without urinary leakage, as by tightening the pelvic floor muscles, the bladder relaxes and helps to reduce the feeling of urgency. PFME's may also be prescribed to reduce the symptoms of prolapse and to improve sexual function.

### Where is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor muscles are a bowl shaped structure of muscles and ligaments attached to the pelvic bones and the tail bone, forming the support at the base of the abdomen for the bladder, uterus (womb) and lower bowel. The openings from these organs pass through the pelvic floor where the muscles wrap around the passages - the urethra from the bladder, the vagina from the uterus, and the rectum from the lower bowel.

### What weakens the pelvic floor muscles?

Normally the pelvic floor muscles around the passages are strong enough to prevent leakage, but the muscles can be weakened as a result of:

- Pregnancy
- Following childbirth
- Changes due to the menopause
- Persistent constipation
- A chronic cough
- Being overweight
- Being generally unfit
- Some medical conditions
- Regularly lifting heavy loads at work or home

### How to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles

To begin, choose a quiet time and place so you can concentrate on learning the exercises correctly.

Sit, stand or lie down with your feet comfortably apart. You can do the exercises in any of these positions.

Relax and breathe normally.

Try not to tighten your buttocks, thighs or abdominal (tummy) muscles.

You need to learn to carry out both slow and fast exercises.

Concentrate and tighten the muscles around the back passage. Imagine you are trying not to pass wind. Then, **squeeze** and **lift** the muscles as if you are trying to stop yourself from passing urine. You have now identified your pelvic floor muscles and by tightening both together, you have the foundation for improving the strength of your pelvic floor.

### **Slow exercise**

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles, lift and squeeze for as long as you can, then 'let go' and relax for a few seconds, then repeat. To begin with, you may only be able to hold this muscle contraction for a few seconds, and may only be able to repeat this a few times. As the muscles become stronger you will be able to hold for longer. Your aim is to hold for 10 seconds, repeated at least 8 times.

### **Fast exercise**

In the same way, tighten and relax your pelvic floor muscles as before but much faster – about one per second for 10 seconds.

**You have the best chance of success if you carry out slow and fast contractions of your pelvic floor muscles as described, 3 times every day for at least three months.**

### **Other helpful advice**

- Once learned you can do the exercises anywhere, as no one will know you are doing them
- A busy lifestyle can mean you forget to do the exercises, so plan your programme and try to associate carrying out the exercises with an event such as switching on the kettle or after a meal, so you remember
- When passing urine, do **not** try to stop the flow by tightening the pelvic floor muscles as this can result in the bladder not completely emptying
- To prevent or reduce urine leakage, squeeze the pelvic floor muscles tightly **at the same time** as you do any activity that usually causes urine leakage. This procedure is called 'The Knack'
- Avoid constipation and straining
- Avoid heavy lifting
- If overweight, aim to reduce your weight to an acceptable level
- A persistent cough can make it more likely that you leak urine. It is very important that you always tighten your pelvic floor muscles during any coughing and also seek advice from your doctor if you have a persistent cough
- Smoking can make a cough worse and also increases the risk of some cancers, including bladder cancer. If you would like help in stopping smoking speak to your doctor or other health professional