

Urology_{West}

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INFORMATION LEAFLET: PELVIC FLOOR CARE

Pelvic floor weakness can be caused by;

Menopause. As you go through the menopause, your body produces less oestrogen (female sex hormone). This in turn reduces the elasticity of the pelvic floor muscles, which can contribute to pelvic floor weakness.

Straining when opening your bowels. The 'pushing down' movement when you strain to open your bowels can overstretch the pelvic floor and make it weaker.

Pregnancy. Many women first notice they have a problem during or immediately after a pregnancy. Carrying a baby puts extra pressure on your pelvic floor muscles from the start of your pregnancy. During the birth of your baby, the muscles have to stretch to allow the baby to be born, which can also damage your pelvic floor muscles. Some women also tear during labour or have an episiotomy (surgical cut to the vagina to allow the baby to come out more easily), or may have had a forceps or suction (ventouse) delivery. All of these delivery methods may damage your pelvic floor.

What are the symptoms of a weak pelvic floor?

You may experience a range of symptoms, including:

- an aching or dragging sensation in your vagina
- a feeling of something coming down inside your vagina, which may be due to a prolapse. This is where one or more organs in your pelvis, such as your womb or vagina drop down from their normal position
- a tendency to leak urine when you cough, laugh or sneeze. This is called stress urinary incontinence
- a need to go to the toilet frequently (called frequency) during the day or the night
- an urgent need to visit the toilet and leaking before you get there or if you don't go (urge incontinence)
- an inability to control the passing of wind from your back passage.

You may have one or more of these symptoms. Your problem may be improved by practising pelvic floor exercises regularly. For information on how to perform these exercises, please read our leaflet, **Pelvic floor exercises for women**.

What can I do to help prevent my pelvic floor becoming weaker?

Prevent constipation by eating a well balanced diet, high in fibre, fruit and vegetables. If you increase the amount of fibre in your diet, do this gradually. You need to increase the amount of fluid you drink as well. If you don't, the fibre may have the opposite effect on your bowels and help to cause, rather than

prevent, constipation. Make sure you drink enough each day. We recommend at least one and a half litres of fluid a day. This is around eight cups, five mugs or 2.7 pints of fluid per day.

Establish a regular pattern for opening your bowels. For example, after breakfast in the morning. Make sure that you sit on the toilet in the correct position, with your knees slightly higher than your hips and lean forward. This will make it easier for you to open your bowels.

Seek treatment for coughs. Persistent coughs can damage your pelvic floor, as every cough bounces on your pelvic floor and may over stretch the muscles. If you develop a cough, seek treatment as soon as possible.

Stop smoking. Sometimes the chemicals in cigarettes can also weaken your pelvic floor muscles. If you smoke, try to quit.

Keep within your normal weight range.

Extra weight puts more pressure on your pelvic floor. Overweight women often say that their symptoms improve once they have lost some weight. Your GP will be able to tell you whether you are an acceptable weight for your height and what you should do if you are under or overweight.

Avoid certain exercises. Some exercises can make the pressure inside your abdomen rise, which then pushes down onto your pelvic floor stretching the muscles. You should **not do** sit ups with straight legs or double straight leg raises. These exercises are included in some keep-fit routines, aerobics and yoga.

Do not stop exercising altogether; just don't do these particular exercises. There are other ways to strengthen your stomach muscles. You should also try to avoid high impact exercises such as step aerobics. Speak to your GP for advice if you are unsure.

Perform pelvic floor exercises. By exercising your pelvic floor, the muscles will become stronger and provide your internal organs with more support. You will be able to control wind better and prevent urine and stool leakages. You may also notice an improvement in your sex life. Performing these exercises is particularly important after the birth of a baby. The area around your vagina (perineum) can be very sore, but it is important that new mums start to do their pelvic floor exercises as soon as possible after the birth. This helps to build up muscle strength again and prevent urinary incontinence in the future.

Avoid lifting heavy objects. Don't be tempted to lift heavy objects. If you need to, then bend your knees, keep your back straight and tighten your pelvic floor before you lift.