

## Pelvic floor exercises for women

Your pelvic floor muscles (PFMs) lie at the base of your pelvis between your pubic bone at the front and your tail bone at the back. The outlets from your bladder (urethra), vagina and back passage (anal canal) pass through your PFMs.

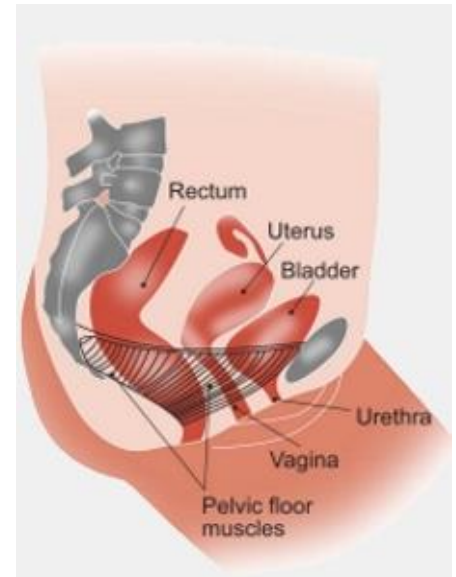
The PFMs support your pelvic organs (bladder, uterus and rectum – the lower part of your bowel). They help to prevent leakage of urine (wee) from your bladder, and wind or faeces (poo) from your back passage. They also support your pelvis and lower back.

When your PFMs get weak or are damaged, they don't work as well. Common causes of this are:

- pregnancy and childbirth
- hormonal changes (pregnancy, menstrual cycle, menopause)
- excessive straining when passing a bowel motion (poo)
- repeated heavy lifting
- being overweight.

Exercising your PFMs can help to:

- improve or maintain bladder and bowel control
- give support to your pelvic organs, helping to prevent or relieve symptoms of vaginal prolapse
- make sex more pleasurable.



### How to strengthen your PFMs

- 1) Lie on your side. You may like to have a pillow in front of your tummy or between your thighs. You need to feel comfortable.
- 2) Relax your tummy, bottom and thighs (when you are relaxed you will see your tummy gently rise and fall as you breathe). It is important that you do this step before you tighten your PFMs.
- 3) Squeeze and lift up into your vagina (or imagine lifting a tampon up inside or stopping passing wind or urine). Ensure that your tummy stays relaxed and you continue to breathe normally.
- 4) Try to lift and hold for one to three seconds then rest for five seconds. Repeat eight to 10 times, three times per day.

If you have been assessed by a West Coast DHB physiotherapist, they will give you a specific PFM exercise programme to follow.



### More advanced PFM exercises

- Try to tighten your PFMs when you are sitting. For example:
  - sit at a table and lean forwards keeping your back straight, rest your elbows on the table
  - sit with your back well supported on a comfortable chair
  - sit on an exercise ball (only if you are familiar with how to sit on a ball correctly).
- Follow steps 2 to 4 of **How to strengthen your PFMs** above.
- Aim to hold for longer, five to 10 seconds. Make sure you relax your PFMs completely between each lift and rest them for a few seconds before you lift again. If your PFMs stop lifting properly they may be tired. Stop and rest.
- As your PFMs get stronger and you are able to lift and hold more easily, try to tighten your PFMs when you are standing.

Your goal is to be able to tighten your PFMs strongly before you cough, sneeze or lift something heavy.

If you are pregnant, you should receive a booklet from your lead maternity carer or from the maternity ward called **Looking after your body after childbirth**. This contains a section specifically on PFM exercises after childbirth.

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