The pelvic floor and resistance exercises

Exercising for good health

Exercise plays a key role in your health as it improves your body fitness, and mental wellbeing. Resistance training strengthens and tones your muscles and plays a key role in keeping your bones strong. One size does not fit all when it comes to exercise and your exercise program needs to be tailored to suit your needs. If you have, or are ‘at risk’ of pelvic floor problems, then there are some things that you need to be aware of.

What is the pelvic floor?

Pelvic floor muscles form the base of the group of muscles commonly called the ‘core’. These muscles work with the deep abdominal (tummy) and back muscles and the diaphragm (breathing muscle) to support the spine and control the pressure inside the abdomen (diagram 1). The pelvic floor muscles play an important role in bladder and bowel control, supporting the pelvic organs and sexual function in both men and women.

Are you at risk of pelvic floor problems?

You are at highest risk of pelvic floor problems if you are in one or more of the groups below.

- pregnant and postnatal women
- women who have had a baby
- menopausal and post menopausal women
- women who have had gynaecological surgery (e.g. hysterectomy)
- men who have had surgery for prostate cancer, and
- elite athletes (e.g. runners, gymnasts, trampolinists).

Your risk is more if you tick one or more of the following.

- you regularly lift heavy weights (e.g. at the gym, or as part of your job)
- you strain often to empty your bowels (constipation)
- you have a chronic cough or sneeze due to asthma, smoking or hayfever
- you are overweight or have a Body Mass Index that is over 25
- you have had trauma to the pelvis area (e.g. a fall, pelvic radiotherapy)
- you have a history of back pain

If you are in one of the ‘at risk’ groups above or if you have symptoms of pelvic floor problems (see ‘How do I know if I have a pelvic floor problem?’) then it is important your exercise program is pelvic floor safe. Protecting your pelvic floor now will save you problems in the future.
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Your pelvic floor and resistance exercises

Your body muscle strength may exceed the ability of your pelvic floor. If you have or are at risk of pelvic floor problems, then it is important you train for the ‘weakest link’ and put your pelvic floor first. There are a number of ways to modify your resistance exercises to protect your pelvic floor:

- Lighten your weights or resistance so that you don’t feel pressure down on your pelvic floor as you move.
- Avoid breath-holding by exhaling with effort (e.g. when you pull, push, lift or lower weights)
- Maintain good posture
- Reduce the level of your abdominal muscle exercise programs (see ‘pelvic floor as part of your core’ fact sheet)
- Reduce the depth of your squats and lunges – aim to keep your hips at a higher level than your knees
- Choose supported positions (eg seated machines or sitting on a fit ball to use hand weights)
- Keep your legs closer together during exercise
- Lift your pelvic floor before you move and relax afterwards. Notice how many reps that you can do before your pelvic floor muscles tire. You may need to add some rests, or reduce the number of reps that you do in a row, while your pelvic floor muscle fitness improves.

Build up your pelvic floor muscle control and then you will be able to progress to doing some more challenging resistance exercises again. For information on PFM exercises visit www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pelvic floor safe resistance exercises</th>
<th>Resistance exercises to avoid</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>seated exercises (e.g. shoulder press, rows, pec deck, bicep curls, knee extensions)</td>
<td>high intensity abdominal exercises (e.g. sit up, crunches, double leg lowers, plank/hovers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>dumbbell triceps extensions (e.g. lying or one arm and leg propped on a bench)</td>
<td>medicine ball rotations</td>
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<td>dumbbell exercises on a Swiss ball</td>
<td>deep lunges or side lunges</td>
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<tr>
<td>shallow and narrow leg squats</td>
<td>wide legged or deep squats</td>
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<tr>
<td>shallow Swiss ball wall squats</td>
<td>jump squats</td>
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<tr>
<td>prone leg curl</td>
<td>lifting or pressing heavy weights</td>
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<tr>
<td>shallow forward lunges</td>
<td>leg press machine with heavy weights</td>
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<tr>
<td>dumbbell row</td>
<td>dead lifts</td>
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<tr>
<td>supine bench/Swiss ball press</td>
<td>high bench step up step down</td>
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<tr>
<td>wall push ups, and</td>
<td>exercises with both feet off the ground (e.g. chin ups, tricep dips, knee tucks)</td>
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<td>floor or ball bridge.</td>
<td>full push ups, and</td>
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<td>any exercise where there is direct downward pressure on the pelvic floor.</td>
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Please note: whilst these exercises are pelvic floor safe, you will also need to consider the number of repetitions, weight lifted, number of sets, length of rest and your fatigue level - which also effects your pelvic floor function.
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How do I know if I have a pelvic floor problem?

Common signs and symptoms of a problem with your pelvic floor include:

- accidentally leaking urine when you exercise, laugh, cough or sneeze
- needing to get to the toilet in a hurry or not making it there in time
- the need to frequently go to the toilet
- finding it difficult to empty your bladder or bowel
- accidental loss of faeces or wind
- a prolapse
  - in women, this may be felt as bulging into the vagina, heaviness or discomfort, or a feeling of pulling, dragging or dropping down
  - in men, this may be noticed as a bulging coming out of the rectum, a feeling of needing to use your bowels but not needing to go
- pelvic pain
- pain during sexual intercourse, and
- poor sensation or loss of bladder control during sexual intercourse.

Where to get help

Pelvic floor problems are not a life sentence, as they can be treated and in many cases cured, however not all bladder or bowel control problems are the result of poor pelvic floor muscle fitness. It is important to see a GP or continence professional if you suffer from any of problems described above and they can determine the best course of action to get you back in control.

For further information about the pelvic floor or to locate your nearest continence health professional contact the National Continence Helpline on freecall 1800 33 00 66 or visit www.continence.org.au.

Visit www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au for more information on putting your pelvic floor first.

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