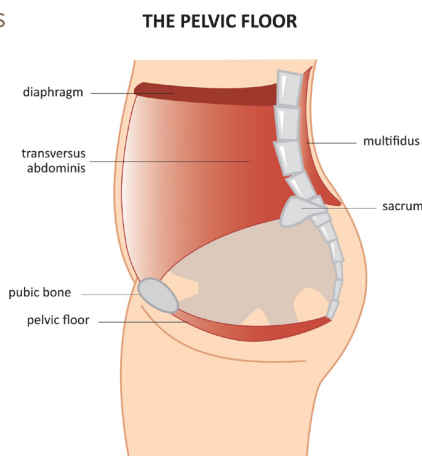


The pelvic floor and core exercises

The pelvic floor muscles as part of the core

Muscles play a key role during exercise, but did you know there is a hidden group of muscles, called pelvic floor muscles, that need special attention?

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.



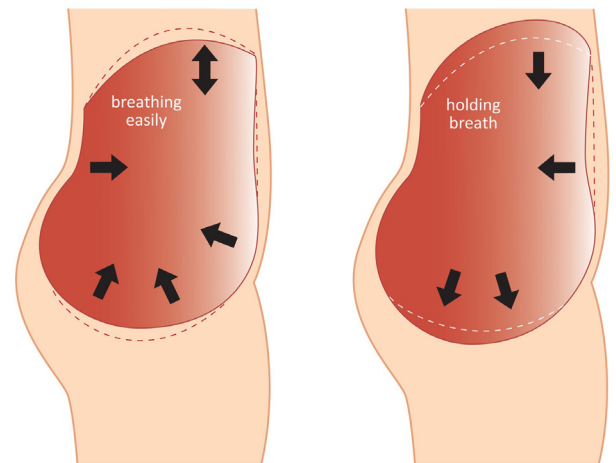
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The pelvic floor muscles play an important role in supporting the pelvic organs, bladder and bowel control and sexual function, in both men and women.

During exercise, the internal pressure in the abdomen changes. For example, when lifting a weight, the internal pressure increases, then returns to normal when the weight is put down.

In the ideal situation the regulation of pressure within the abdomen happens automatically. For example, when lifting a weight, the muscles of the core work together well: the pelvic floor muscles lift, the abdominal and back muscles draw in to support the spine, and breathing is easy. In this scenario, the pelvic floor muscles respond appropriately to the increase in abdominal pressure. If any of the muscles of the core, including the pelvic floor, are weakened or damaged, this coordinated automatic action may be altered. In this situation, during exercises that increase the internal abdominal pressure, there is potential to overload the pelvic floor, causing downward pressure.

PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLE CONTRACTION



Correct action
The pelvic floor lifts, the deep abdominals draw in and there is no change in breathing

Incorrect action
Bracing the abdominals strongly without focusing on lifting the pelvic floor first, can result in downwards pressure on the pelvic floor

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When this happens repeatedly during each exercise session, over time this may place a downward strain on the pelvic organs and this may result in loss of bladder or bowel control, or pelvic organ prolapse. Pelvic floor symptoms can also be potentially worsened if a problem already exists.

Pelvic floor muscles need to be flexible to work as part of the core, which means that they need to be able to relax as well as lift and hold. It is common for people to brace their core muscles constantly during exercise in the belief they are supporting the spine, but constant bracing can lead to the muscles becoming excessively tight and stiff.

Pelvic floor muscle stiffness commonly coexists with muscle weakness and can contribute to problems such as urinary urgency and leakage. Other problems often associated with the pelvic floor muscles being too tight include pelvic pain, pain during intercourse and difficulty emptying the bladder.

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
- poor sensation or loss of bladder control during sexual intercourse.

Are you at risk of pelvic floor problems?

You are at greatest risk of pelvic floor problems if you are in one or more of the following groups:

- pregnant or postnatal women
- women who have ever 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
- elite athletes (e.g. runners, gymnasts).

Your risk is increased 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
- you are overweight or have a Body Mass Index greater than 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 these at-risk groups or if you have symptoms of pelvic floor problems, it is important your exercise program is pelvic floor safe. Protecting your pelvic floor now will save you problems in the future.

Core exercises and the pelvic floor

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

- Cease strong abdominal exercises. See the next page for core exercises to avoid.
- Reduce the level of your abdominal muscle exercise program. See the next page for suggestions of pelvic floor safe core exercises.
- Avoid breath holding by exhaling with effort.
- Maintain good posture.
- Lift your pelvic floor first and hold it during the exercise, then relax after.
- Notice how many repetitions you can do before your pelvic floor muscles tire. You may need to add some rests or reduce the number of repetitions until your pelvic floor muscle fitness improves.

If you are pregnant, early postnatal or have recently had gynaecological or prostate surgery, more gentle abdominal exercises are recommended. Seek advice from a continence and women’s health physiotherapist or your exercise professional to check which of the pelvic floor safe exercises are best for you. It is important to build your pelvic floor muscle control before progressing to more challenging abdominal exercises again.

For information on pelvic floor muscle exercises, go to pelvicfloorfirst.org.au

Pelvic floor safe core exercises

Lower intensity abdominal challenge

- Single leg extension with one leg supported by a hand on stationary knee or moving foot on ball
- Knees side to side with feet on ball
- Modified plank on hands or knees with a slight bend at the hips
- Wall push ups
- Ball bridge (feet on ball or back on ball, +/- single leg lift)
- Arm and leg lift on all fours
- Leg lift sitting on the ball
- Shoulder rotations with back on the ball
- Standing balance work on the bosu or balance disc

Core exercises to avoid

Higher intensity abdominal exercises

- Sit ups, curl ups, crunches
- Abdominal exercises with medicine ball
- V-sit
- Hundreds
- Double-leg lowers
- Plank position on hands and feet (e.g. hovers, full push ups)

Please note, while 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 affects your pelvic floor function.

But how do I get flat abs?

If you are aiming for a flat stomach, sit ups and crunches are not the best option. They will tone the “six-pack” muscles but will not flatten the stomach. In fact, doing lots of sit ups can cause excessive upper-abdominal tension and create a “pot belly” appearance. Low-impact aerobic exercise to help lose extra abdominal fat is important. Pelvic floor exercises, when done correctly with relaxed upper abdominals and normal lower abdominal co-contraction, will also help to achieve flatter abs.

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 the problems previously described so 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 **1800 33 00 66** or go to **continence.org.au**

Go to **pelvicfloorfirst.org.au** for more information on putting your pelvic floor first.

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pelvic floor first



Free Pelvic Floor First app

- Three customised workouts for all fitness levels and pelvic floor strength
- Wide range of exercises designed by physiotherapist and fitness leader Lisa Westlake
- Instructional videos and audio for all workouts
- Detailed pictures and instructions for each exercise
- Pelvic floor muscle exercise guide
- Ability to personalise workouts
- Links to learn more about your pelvic floor

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* Please note when searching for the app on an iPad select 'iPhone only'.

More information
National Continence Helpline

1800 33 00 66

pelvicfloorfirst.org.au

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