

Pelvic Floor Exercises

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Do you ever refrain from running for the bus to avoid a minor leakage?
Are you unsure what pelvic floor exercises to practice during and after pregnancy?

This article will help you locate the different pelvic floor muscles, which are shown in the diagram and, together with breathing techniques, explain pre and post labour exercises.

For more details about pelvic floor anatomy, and the role of osteopathic treatment, see the article, on page 105 in the last issue of ABC magazine or look at

www.brightonosteopaths.co.uk



SECTION ONE: LOCATING THE DIFFERENT MUSCLES

The different sets of muscles located around the three openings (see diagram) are not familiar to most women and can be quite hard to locate at first. They are easier to find and isolate if you kneel down, rest your head and arms onto the floor and raise your buttocks into the air. Start by just rotating your 'tail end'. Try to keep the muscles of the stomach, legs and buttocks relaxed and attempt the following:

- Contract and relax the ring of muscles around the back passage. These are the big muscles of the anus, which we use automatically every time we empty our bowels. They are located right at the base of the spine next to the coccyx or tailbone. You may find it easier to imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from the bowel.
- Now move your attention away from the back to the front of the base of the body. Find the muscles you use to empty your bladder. These muscles are inside the body (unlike the anal muscles which are on the outside of the body) and lie just next to the vagina. Next time you go to the toilet to pass urine you can also try the 'stop test' about half way through emptying your bladder. Once you have stopped the flow of urine using these bladder muscles, relax again and allow your bladder to empty completely. Do not do the 'stop test' every time you pass water, as this will confuse the bladder function. If you have difficulty stopping the flow, do the appropriate exercises and then retest with the 'stop test' every few weeks.
- Now practice squeezing up the muscles of the vagina with equal pressure on the left and the right side. Imagine you are trying to hold a tampon in your vagina. Then squeeze only alternate sides. Try standing with one foot resting on the toilet, placing two fingers inside your vagina and see if you can contract the vaginal wall muscles around the fingers. • Some people find just separating the muscles into the back (anus) and the front (vagina and bladder) much more manageable. Once you have persevered in locating these two or three groups of muscle you can move onto Section Two.

SECTION TWO: BREATHING

If you watch a weight lifter you will see that they do both the heavy work of lifting, as well as the controlled release, using the out-breath. Equally we are going to use the out-breath as we work, either to relax and bear down in preparation for labour, or to pull up and tighten after labour.

PRE-NATAL BREATHING EXERCISE

- Sit up straight on the floor with the soles of the feet pressed together on the floor in front of you, lean back a little and press your hands into the floor behind you. As you breathe in contract the muscles of the pelvic floor, especially around the vagina,

inwards and upwards. Breathe out and release these muscles as slowly as possible. Then you can also practice a stronger and longer out-breath that presses down and opens the birth canal of the vagina. Keeping your neck and jaw relaxed will help you relax the muscles of the pelvic floor.

POST NATAL REVERSE BREATHING

- Reverse breathing is used after pregnancy to close the lower part of your body and pull the stretched muscles upwards and inwards. Sit or lie comfortably with your spine supported and your hands resting on your abdomen. As you breathe out pull in your waist, drawing your navel upwards and closer to your spine at the back. The out-breath is longer and slightly stronger than the in-breath. You can either take a 'resting breath', in and out, before inhaling and drawing up again, or repeat the Reverse Breathing without a pause. Practise for a few rounds, or until you feel tired and loose your rhythm. Pursing the lips, as if to play act giving a child a kiss, enhances the toning of the openings in the pelvic floor.

SECTION THREE: CLASSIC PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES

Sections one and two are adequate for pre and post labour, and also allow you to move on to practise section three more effectively. For these, more advanced pelvic floor exercises, only apply the breathing techniques if appropriate and, if at all unsure seek advice from your osteopath or your active birth teacher. If you are pregnant emphasise the relaxation phase and practise in different birthing positions that open the hips and the pelvic floor such as, sitting and reclining, sitting on a chair cowboy style, supported squatting, leaning over a bean bag or on all fours. After pregnancy practise in closed positions such as standing or sitting with the legs very slightly apart, or laying on your back with the legs up against the wall. For each exercise you can isolate the different sections or work the whole of the pelvic floor. For all exercises do not hold your breath or tense your buttocks, legs or shoulders.

SLOW PULL UPS

- Slowly tighten one section, or the whole of the pelvic floor, and hold. Either: hold for at least 10 seconds, keeping breathing, and then relax the muscles. Or count the number of normal breaths you can take whilst holding the contraction. Now practise the slow long pull up with this number of breaths and re-test after a week. Repeat 5 times.

FAST PULL UP

- Now pull the muscles up quickly and tightly and relax immediately. These are short sharp contractions in a row.

Either:

do 5 short sharp contractions in a row Or do as many as possible in a row and count the number. When you start to falter that is the number to practise with. Re-test after a week. Repeat 5 times.

THE ELEVATOR

- Imagine the pelvic floor like an elevator, stopping at different levels in its journey up and down, and in a controlled way lift the muscles up in stages and release down in stages.

THE SWING

- Contract the muscles at the back around the anus.
- Contract the muscles in the middle in the vagina.
- Contract the muscles at the front around the bladder.
- Now move from the back to the front and to the back again.

The last exercise below, is specifically to tighten the pelvic floor after birth and is very good if you have stress incontinence.

BLOWING OUT THE CANDLE

- Imagine you are trying to blow out one of those candles that keeps relighting. Take a deep breathe in, purse the lips and exhale with a series of short, sharp, strong reverse out-breaths, tightening and lifting the pelvic floor and abdomen with each short out-breath. It is a similar movement to a series of little coughs. The mind and body likes being entertained so practise variations of the above, and, dare I say it, as many times a day as possible, the optimum being 10 times a day. 'When?' I hear you ask. Well, new mums can practise, whilst feeding or changing a nappy, and those with toddlers, whilst waiting for the kettle to boil or watching the TV - whenever you find the time!

In the next issue of ABC my article will cover the interventions needed, medically or otherwise, following a prolapse.

Diagram and guidance by kind permission of Francoise Freedman and Doriel Hall - Yoga For Pregnancy, published by Cassell & Co