



# Pelvic Floor Health



**Is your pelvic floor muscle functional?**

Long, supple and taut, with the ability to contract and relax as needed.

**Or dysfunctional?**

Tight, weak and loose, which can lead to incontinence and 'POP' - pelvic organ prolapse.

### What is Optimum Function?

Good muscle co-ordination is not just about the strength in your muscles. When a large force is exerted onto a muscle, it also needs to be at its desired length to be able to contract effectively. For optimum function, your muscle needs strength *and* length. If your muscle is locked in a short, or tightened position, it is impossible to strengthen. This is why it is so important for your pelvic floor to be able to relax as well as contract.

Your pelvic floor needs to both support your organs, and have the motor skill required for continence, passing urine and faeces when needed and preventing it from escaping when it's not appropriate. Our ultimate aim is for all of the muscles in your body to be at their desired length, strength and resting tension. If there is huge dysfunction *anywhere* in your body, it will impact on your pelvic floor and core function.

### What can cause dysfunction?

If a muscle is behaving in a dysfunctional manner, the most common reason is that it is not well aligned. This means that over-compensation will occur further up and down the body. Muscle dysfunction can result in strain, muscle tearing, pain or a muscular imbalance.

### What is a hypertonic pelvic floor?

A 'hypertonic' pelvic floor has too much tension. This means that your muscle is unable to relax, and therefore cannot contract effectively, because it is constantly switched on. This increased tension can also result in fatigue of the muscle, which can make it even harder to connect to.

### What causes a hypertonic pelvic floor?

There can be many different causes of pelvic floor tension. The more common ones are:

- Posture. The position of your pelvis changes your pelvic floor function. If you "tuck your bum in" your sacrum draws towards your pubic bone and the muscle will shorten.
- Excessive sitting. This causes a passive shortening of your pelvic floor muscle.
- Gripping. It is common to grip-in your abdominals, pelvic floor or buttocks as part of your posture, or in the learned behaviour of 'holding your belly in!'
- Stress. Tension can be stored in your pelvic floor muscles. If you are hyper-mobile in the hip joints or pelvis, your pelvic floor may compensate by gripping.
- Trauma. Falling onto your tailbone or incurring large impact to the buttocks can cause your pelvic floor to tighten as a protective mechanism. Traumatic events like sexual abuse can have the same effect.
- Bladder/bowel dysfunction. Chronic constipation or a 'sense of urgency' put your pelvic floor muscles in a state of constant stress and contraction.
- Infection/inflammation. Caused by chronic thrush or UTIs
- Pelvic surgery or birth injury. Tears, episiotomies and caesarean scars can cause pulls within the

within the fascia that lead to dysfunction.

- Injury. Your pelvic floor can compensate and tighten-up following a hip, knee or ankle injury, or even surgery that you didn't fully recover from.
- Wearing high heels. This shifts your pelvis out of alignment and tightens your hamstrings which in turn tightens your pelvic floor
- Weak glutes. Your pelvic floor grips to compensate from lack of support. Weak glutes are also often caused by excessive sitting.

### What about Kegels?

Kegels are a tightening exercise designed to strengthen your pelvic floor. They were invented in 1945 by Dr Arnold Kegel. At the time, they revolutionised pelvic floor health, and there is evidence to show that doing them regularly can improve symptoms. However, we've learnt a LOT about human mechanics since the 1940's. And we've since discovered that if kegels aren't done correctly, they can actually make your pelvic floor tighter and weaker, and lead to more dysfunction.

**For optimal function, we need to consider the body as a whole, rather than simply isolating and addressing the pelvic floor.**

For someone who has severe incontinence due to weakness or has no sensation in their pelvic floor, Kegels can be really useful. Especially when used as part of rehabilitation by a Women's Health Physio. We believe that Kegels have their place, and when done correctly, they can be a valuable piece of the puzzle. But there is so much more that you can do.

### How else can I support my pelvic floor?

1. Consider how much time you spend sitting down.  
When we sit, particularly if your tailbone is tucked under (like most of us do) your pelvic floor is shortened and tightened. Muscles at their optimal function need the ability to both contract and release. If we are sitting for the majority of the day, our pelvic floor is likely to lose the ability to release, and therefore won't contract effectively either. If you do spend a lot of time sitting, there are lots of exercises you can do to help to release your pelvic floor.
2. Consider pelvic floor health as a full body issue.  
Everything is connected! Tension and imbalance throughout your body can make a difference to what is happening in your pelvis. Consider your posture, the alignment of your feet, legs, ribcage and head, and the way you are moving day to day.
3. Consider your breathing.  
If you send your breath into your belly on every inhale, you are creating too much pressure in your pelvic floor. You need to use the whole of your respiratory system, focusing on how your breath moves into your ribcage on every inhale. When you inhale your pelvic floor should naturally move downwards to create space for the breath and your moving organs, but this should not be forced.
4. Consider your toileting habits.  
If you are constipated, or straining to go to the toilet, you are putting undue pressure on your

pelvic floor each time you pass a bowel movement. You can address this by increasing your water intake, increasing the fibre in your diet and changing the angle at which you go to the toilet. Put something under your feet, a squatty potty <https://www.squattypotty.com/>, a toddler step or even a pile of books, to change your anorectal angle and make it easier for the faeces to come out. This is such a simple step that takes little effort and can make all the difference to your pelvic floor.

### How does my breathing affect my pelvic floor?

The relationship between your thoracic (respiratory) diaphragm, and your pelvic diaphragm is a crucial part of your body's core function. When we inhale, both diaphragms contract and pull downwards, and our ribcage and abdominal wall expand. When we exhale, both diaphragms recover their position to resting. For these movements to happen smoothly, the system should have a sense of elasticity. During exhalation, the pelvic floor lifts through an elastic recoil mechanism as the abdominal wall returns to rest position and this movement should never feel forced or 'gripped'.

Rather than 'working hard' during your exhalation, try exhaling first and allowing time for the natural recoil or 'lift' of the pelvic floor. Then you can deepen the connection through a conscious contraction if needed.

The body is a whole system and should be treated as such. When exercising, it is useful to make sure we move and work with a sense of flow or 'dynamic training' that takes into account the pelvic floor's role within the body.

In pregnancy, postural changes may affect your ability to find optimal breathing patterns. However, by releasing tension and working on your breathing synergy, you can restore your alignment and learn to use your breathing effectively.

Dysfunction in your breathing and alignment can disturb the natural relationship between your body's diaphragms, including the thoracic and pelvic, leading to a dysfunctional core system. This may result in a tightening in the waist, a bracing of the fascia and abdomen muscles, and pressure on the lower abdominal organs - which could, over time, lead to prolapse of the organs in the lesser pelvis.

It is often difficult to find your pelvic floor muscles, as stronger nearby muscles, such as the gluteus maximus or piriformis muscles, may be faster at responding. This is especially true for anyone who has lost sensation due to weakness or birth trauma. If you are struggling to know that you are finding the right connection, we would recommend seeing a Women's Health Physio.

### Daily Movement Tips

Here are some tips that will help you to look after your body, even on the days when you don't have time to do something more formal. Remember, don't put too much pressure on yourself! Just move mindfully when you can.

#### When sitting:

Be mindful of the back of your ribcage aligning over the back of your pelvis.  
Sit on top of your 'sit bones' allowing your tailbone to untuck.

**When standing:**

Be aware of the position of your pelvis in relation to your feet and ribcage.

Try to keep your pelvis aligned over your ankles.

When you move to stand from lying on a bed, or the floor, always roll to the side, rather than 'doing a sit-up'.

**When using the toilet:**

Reduce the need to strain by elevating your feet on toddler steps, books or a squatty potty.

**When picking things up:**

Avoid 'loaded rotation', or twisting, whilst picking up something heavy, such as your baby or toddler.

Squat when lifting, rather than bending at the waist, to reduce pressure on your back.

Try not to 'flare' your ribcage when you reach up to take something from a kitchen cabinet.

Use your breath to support you each time you pick your baby up. Exhale on the effort to help your pelvic floor and abdominals control the Intra-Abdominal Pressure that is created.

**When carrying heavy items:**

Try not to balance children on your hips to take their weight, if you can carry them in your arms, even for as little as 5 minutes, this will be as useful as just 5 minutes of exercise.

Try to swap sides when carrying your child. It's unlikely you'll manage an even split; but simply switching every so often can make a big difference.

Avoid carrying car-seats! When you need to do so, hold the seat close to your centre of gravity.

**A holistic approach**

Centred Mums takes a full body approach to pelvic floor health. We address your body holistically in order to improve your core function, release tension, build strength and find a sense of balance throughout the body.

You can join our mailing list for more pelvic floor tips and find out about our 'pelvic floor safe' exercise programmes at [www.centredmums.com](http://www.centredmums.com)