



# ONE IN THREE WOMEN WHO EVER HAD A BABY WET THEMSELVES

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## Every woman who has had a baby should do pelvic floor exercises

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Women who have even just one baby are nearly three times more likely to leak urine and wet themselves, than women who have not had a baby. The more babies you have, the more chance you will leak urine and wet yourself.

### Why do you leak urine after having a baby?

As the baby moves through the birth canal the nerves and pelvic floor muscles that keep the bladder shut get stretched. It is rare for the bladder itself to be damaged during birth but the muscles and nerves are often over stretched. The muscles can sometimes be left weak and cannot keep all the urine in the bladder. The bladder then leaks.

Leaking happens mostly when you cough, sneeze, lift or do exercise. You may feel a strong urge to empty your bladder. You may also have trouble holding on. You need to do pelvic floor muscle exercises to help the muscles get strong again.

### Will this leaking go away by itself?

Leaking will not go away if you just ignore it. Exercise your pelvic floor muscles to help get their strength back. The leaking is then more likely to stop. You may start wetting yourself if you do not get your pelvic floor muscle strength back after each baby. This gets even worse as the pelvic floor muscles get weaker with age.

### How does my bladder work?

The bladder is a hollow muscle pump. It fills slowly with urine from the kidneys. The urethra (urine tube) is kept closed by a ring of muscle called a sphincter. When the bladder holds 200–300mls of urine, you should start to feel the urge to pass urine. When you sit on the toilet, the sphincter and pelvic floor muscles should relax completely. Then the bladder squeezes to empty the urine out. After this, the same 'fill and empty' cycle begins again.

### What do my pelvic floor muscles do?

The pelvic floor muscles:

- ⇒ lift and close the bladder tube (urethra)
- ⇒ squeeze around the vagina and the anus (back passage)
- ⇒ help to hold the bladder, the uterus (womb) and bowel in their proper place
- ⇒ help to provide sexual sensation.



## What happens if my pelvic floor muscles are weak after having my baby?

Any of the following things might happen. You might:

- ⇒ leak urine when you cough, sneeze, lift, laugh or do exercise
- ⇒ not be able to control passing wind
- ⇒ often feel a strong and urgent need to empty your bladder or bowel
- ⇒ not have good support for your bladder, your uterus or your bowel
- ⇒ have reduced sensation with sexual activity.

### Pelvic organ prolapse

Without good support one or more of your pelvic organs might sag down into your vagina. Women feel a heaviness, or a bulge or dragging in the vagina. This is called pelvic organ prolapse. Prolapse is very common. It happens to about one in ten women in Australia.

## What can I do to stop these things from happening?

- ⇒ Exercise your pelvic floor muscles
- ⇒ Keep good bladder and bowel habits:
  - Eat two pieces of fruit and five serves of vegetables daily to prevent constipation
  - Do not go to the toilet 'just in case'. This might reduce how much you can hold in your bladder
  - Make sure your bladder is empty after going to the toilet.
- ⇒ Protect your pelvic floor muscles when opening your bowels. A good way to sit on the toilet is to put your forearms on your thighs. Relax your pelvic floor muscles and allow your belly to gently bulge. Never push downwards to empty the bladder or bowel
- ⇒ Keep your weight within the right range for your height and age.



Call the National Continence Helpline on **1800 33 00 66** or visit the **continence.org.au** for more information.

## How can I care for my weak pelvic floor muscles?

Childbirth might have stretched your pelvic floor muscles. Avoid pushing down on your pelvic floor muscles to prevent further stretching, particularly in the first weeks after birth. This will protect them.

Here are a few ideas to help you:

- ⇒ Try to lift, squeeze and hold your pelvic floor muscles before you sneeze, cough, blow your nose or lift
- ⇒ Cross your legs and squeeze them tightly together before each cough or sneeze
- ⇒ Share the lifting of heavy loads
- ⇒ Do not strain when using your bowels
- ⇒ Avoid bouncing exercises
- ⇒ Exercise your pelvic floor muscles to make them stronger.

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**Less than two out of 10 women do their pelvic floor exercises daily**

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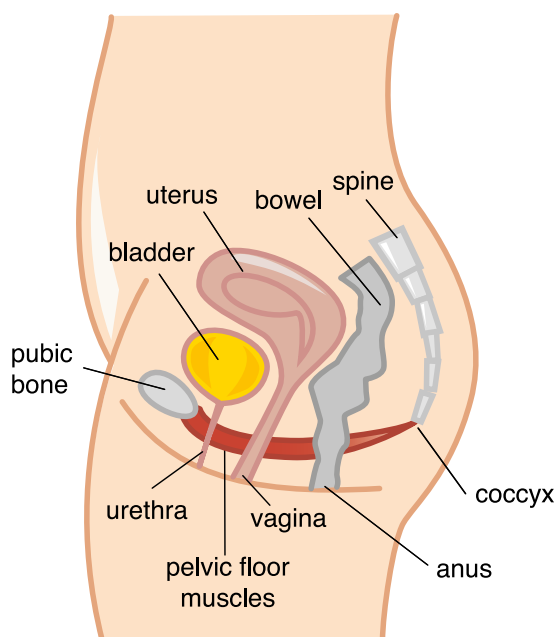
## Where are my pelvic floor muscles?

The first thing to do is to find out which muscles you need to exercise. Here are two things you can try:

- ⇒ Sit or lie down with the muscles of your thighs, bottom (buttocks) and stomach relaxed. Squeeze the ring of muscle around the anus (back passage) as if you are trying to stop passing wind. Now relax this muscle. Squeeze and let go a couple of times to be sure you have found the right muscles. Remember, do not squeeze your bottom.
- ⇒ Imagine trying to stop the stream of urine when sitting on the toilet after emptying your bladder. Then relax as if to start your stream again. You can do this to learn which muscles are the right ones to use. Your bladder may not empty the way it should if you stop and start your stream too often.

If you do not feel a distinct 'lift and squeeze' of your pelvic floor muscles when you try to squeeze, ask for help from your pelvic health physiotherapist or nurse continence specialist. They will help you to get your pelvic floor muscles working the right way.

Even women with very weak pelvic floor muscles can be helped by exercising their pelvic floor muscles.



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## How do I exercise my pelvic floor muscles?

Now that you can feel the pelvic floor muscles working, you can:

- ⇒ lift and squeeze the muscles around your anus (back passage) and your urethra (urine tube), vagina at the same time. Feel a sense of lift each time you squeeze your pelvic floor muscles. Hold them strong and tight as you count to eight. Then, let them go and relax. You should have a distinct feeling of letting go completely
- ⇒ repeat the lift, squeeze and let go. It is best to rest for about eight seconds in between each lift up of the muscles. If you can't hold for the count of eight, just hold for as long as you can
- ⇒ if you cannot feel your muscles contracting, change your position and try again. The exercises can be done while sitting, lying or standing
- ⇒ repeat this lift and squeeze as many times as you can. Try to aim for between eight and twelve times
- ⇒ each day try to do three sets of eight to twelve lift and squeeze, with a rest in between
- ⇒ try sets while lying down, sitting or standing
- ⇒ use 'the knack'. This is when you brace your pelvic floor muscles by squeezing up and holding each time before you cough, sneeze or lift anything.

While doing pelvic floor muscle exercises:

- ⇒ do not hold your breath
- ⇒ only lift and squeeze
- ⇒ do not tighten your bottom (buttocks)
- ⇒ keep your thighs relaxed.



## Exercise your pelvic floor muscles the right way

Fewer strong squeezes are better than a lot of half-hearted ones. Ask for help from your pelvic health physiotherapist or nurse continence specialist if you are not sure you are doing the exercises right.

Seek help if you do not see any improvement in symptoms or symptoms are getting worse after three weeks of doing regular pelvic floor exercises.

## Make the training part of your daily life

Once you have learnt how to do pelvic floor muscle exercises, do them often as long as you can with the right technique. Every day is best. Make a regular time to do them. This might be when you:

- ⇒ finish on the toilet
- ⇒ wash your hands
- ⇒ have a drink
- ⇒ change the baby
- ⇒ feed the baby
- ⇒ have a shower.

It's a good idea to get into the lifelong habit of doing pelvic floor muscle exercises.

Remember to always brace your pelvic floor muscles before you cough, sneeze or lift. This is called having 'the knack'.

## If things do not get any better after three weeks seek help

Speak to your doctor if any of the following problems are not getting better:

- ⇒ any leaking of urine
- ⇒ the need to rush to the toilet to pass urine
- ⇒ the need to rush to the toilet to open your bowels
- ⇒ not being able to hold on when you want to
- ⇒ not being able to control passing wind
- ⇒ burning or stinging inside when you pass urine
- ⇒ having to strain to start the flow of urine.

Pelvic floor muscle damage may take up to six months to get better. You should speak to your doctor, pelvic health physiotherapist or nurse continence specialist if things are not any better after three weeks of doing regular pelvic floor exercises.

## Call the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66 (free call)

Speak with a nurse continence specialist for free and confidential advice on resources, details for local continence services, products and financial assistance.

## For more information, you can also visit:

[continence.org.au](http://continence.org.au)  
[toiletmap.gov.au](http://toiletmap.gov.au)  
[health.gov.au/bladder-bowel](http://health.gov.au/bladder-bowel)

*This fact sheet is intended as a general overview only and is not a substitute for professional assessment and care.*

*This fact sheet is available in other languages from [continence.org.au](http://continence.org.au)*



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