




**One in
three**
women who
ever had a
baby wet
themselves

A photograph of three women in profile, smiling and looking towards the right. They are positioned in the lower half of the frame. The background is a warm, orange gradient. A thick yellow curved line sweeps across the bottom of the image, partially overlapping the women and the text.

**Every woman
who has had
a baby should
do pelvic floor
muscle training**

One in three women who ever had a baby wet themselves

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?

The baby stretches the nerves and pelvic floor muscles that keep the bladder shut as it moves through the birth canal. 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 training to help the muscles get strong again.

Will this leaking go away by itself?

Leaking will not go away if you just ignore it. Train your pelvic floor muscles to help get their strength back. Then the leaking is 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 start to feel the urge to pass urine. When you sit on the toilet, the sphincter and pelvic floor muscles relax. Then the bladder squeezes the urine out. After this, the same ‘fill and empty’ cycle begins again.

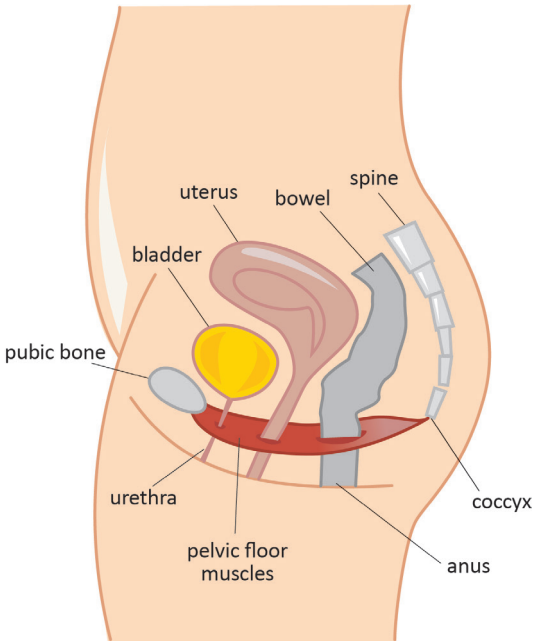


**Less than two out
of 10 women do
their pelvic floor
exercises daily**

What do my pelvic floor muscles do?

The pelvic floor muscles:

- ▶ lift the bladder
- ▶ squeeze around the vagina and the rectum (back passage)
- ▶ help to hold the bladder, the uterus (womb) and bowel in their proper place.



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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.

Pelvic organ prolapse

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

Women feel a heaviness, or a bulge or dragging in the vagina. Across the lifespan, one in five women may require surgery if these symptoms are a bother.

What can I do to stop these things from happening?

- ▶ Train your pelvic floor muscles
- ▶ Keep good bladder and bowel habits:
 - Eat two pieces of fruit and five serves of vegetables daily
 - 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. Then put your feet close to the toilet. Relax your pelvic floor muscles and gently push
- ▶ Keep your weight within the right range for your height and age.

For more information see the brochures: 'Pelvic Floor Muscle Training for Women', 'Overactive Bladder and Urgency' and 'Good Bladder Habits for Everyone'.

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 squeeze, lift 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
- ▶ Make your pelvic floor muscles stronger through training.

Where are my pelvic floor muscles?

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

- ▶ Sit or lie down with the muscles of your thighs, 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 buttocks
- ▶ Try to stop the stream of urine when sitting on the toilet to empty your bladder. Then 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. You need active pelvic floor muscles to be able to stop your urine flow.

If you do not feel a distinct ‘squeeze and lift’ of your pelvic floor muscles when you try to squeeze, ask for help from your continence physiotherapist or continence nurse advisor. 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 pelvic floor muscle training.

How do I do pelvic floor muscle training?

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

- ▶ squeeze and draw in the muscles around your anus (back passage) and vagina at the same time. Lift them UP inside. 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
- ▶ repeat the squeeze and lift and letting 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
- ▶ repeat this squeeze and lift as many times as you can. Try to aim for between eight and twelve squeezes
- ▶ try to do three sets of eight to twelve squeezes each, with a rest in between. A training program is three sets of up to eight to twelve squeezes

- ▶ do your whole training program each day. 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.

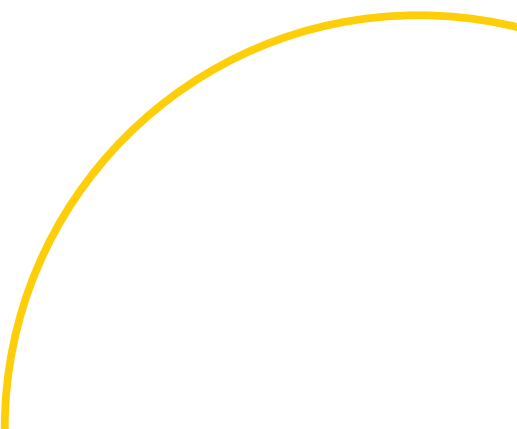
While doing pelvic floor muscle training:

- ▶ do not hold your breath
- ▶ only squeeze and lift
- ▶ do not tighten your buttocks
- ▶ keep your thighs relaxed.

Do your pelvic floor muscle training the right way

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

Seek help if you do not see a change in symptoms after three months.




Make the training part of your daily life

Once you have learnt how to do pelvic floor muscle squeezes, do them often. Every day is best. Give each set of squeezes your full focus. Make a regular time to do your pelvic floor muscle squeezes. This might be when you:

- ▶ go to 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'.



Make pelvic floor exercises a daily habit

If things do not get any better after three months 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 get 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, continence physiotherapist or continence nurse advisor if things are not any better after three months.



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

The helpline has a team of clinical advisors providing free, confidential advice, resources, details for local continence services, products and subsidies.

For more information, you can also visit:

continence.org.au

toiletmap.gov.au

health.gov.au/bladder-bowel

This booklet is intended as a general overview only and is no substitute for professional assessment and care.

This booklet is available in other languages from continence.org.au



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