

HOW TO DO PELVIC MUSCLE EXERCISES (KEGEL EXERCISES)

Identifying the correct muscles and keys for success:

- These muscles can be identified by stopping your urine flow midstream and trying to remember which muscles you used and how a contraction feels. Some women incorrectly contract their buttock, legs, abdominals and hold their breath. To ensure proper breathing, always perform your squeeze on the exhale. This will not only prevent you from holding your breath, which can actually damage your pelvic floor and pelvic organs, but it helps to promote a better pelvic floor contraction.
- It is important to isolate the muscles surrounding the vagina, urethra and anus. You should feel the vagina and anus squeeze, lift (towards your head), and tighten. To be sure you are not using your abdominal muscles - place your hand on your abdomen while you squeeze the pelvic floor muscles. If you feel your abdomen move, you are also using your stomach muscles.
- These exercises are best performed with an empty bladder. You might learn to identify the muscles by stopping your urine flow. However, you should not do this on a normal basis. This can impede normal bladder function.

Positioning:

- The exercises should be done in a position that is appropriate to your strength level. Levels of difficulty from easiest to most challenging are:
 - Lying on your back with pillows or a wedge under your buttocks to elevate your pelvis. This allows gravity to assist you in the lift component of your Kegel (this is a good start for anyone who has prolapse, regardless of muscle strength, since it unloads the pelvic organs).
 - Lying flat on your back
 - Sitting in a chair
 - Standing up
 - During other functional activities or exercises
- Try your Kegel in these different positions. Can you feel a good closure and lift of your pelvic floor muscles in all of these positions? If not, work at the level that is slightly challenging to you, but you are still able to get a good quality pelvic floor contraction.

Duration:

- How long and how strongly you hold your Kegel are important factors in an effective pelvic floor muscle strengthening program. There are two types of exercises to perform:
 - Quick contractions - these are important for times of increased stress on the pelvic floor such as during coughing, sneezing, brief jumping, and lifting. To do these exercises you want to hold your Kegel at your maximum effort for a 2 second hold followed by a 4 second relaxation time between contractions.
 - Slow contractions - these are for endurance. They work for us all day long to support our pelvic organs and as part of our core. Think walking and standing. Typically, this is a 10 second hold and a 10 second rest. If your endurance is poor, hold your Kegel for less time until you build up your endurance. For example, if you can only hold the Kegel for 5 seconds without losing the Kegel, then start there. Progress the hold by 1 second weekly until you are able to reach a 10 second hold.

Effective pelvic floor muscle strengthening can be quite complex. The key is quality over quantity. A skilled Pelvic Floor Physical Therapist can assess your pelvic floor muscle function and design a program that is best suited to your individual needs. The above tips may be sufficient for a woman who is not experiencing symptoms of pelvic floor muscle dysfunction and has good awareness of her pelvic floor. However, for women experiencing symptoms such as incontinence, urinary urgency and frequency, pelvic organ prolapse, vaginal heaviness or pressure, and vulvar, vaginal or pelvic pain, pelvic floor physical therapy can be an invaluable and life changing resource.