

Pelvic floor muscle exercises



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This fact sheet is for men who want to know more about pelvic floor muscle exercises. These can help with some urinary problems – for example, if you leak urine after having treatment for prostate cancer or an enlarged prostate.

The exercises may also help if you have bowel problems, or have difficulty getting or keeping an erection after treatment for prostate cancer.

We explain how pelvic floor muscle exercises can help, and how to do them properly. We don't talk about other ways to deal with these problems – speak to your doctor or nurse about other ways to manage them.

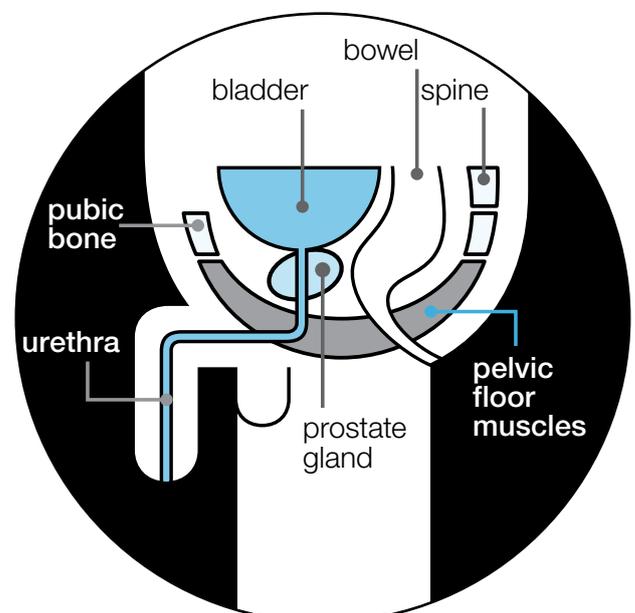
For more information on urinary problems after treatment for prostate cancer, read our  Tool Kit fact sheet, *Urinary problems after prostate cancer treatment*. For information about problems after treatment for an enlarged prostate, read our booklet, *Enlarged prostate: A guide to diagnosis and treatment*, and our fact sheet, *Transurethral resection of the prostate (TURP)*. For information on erection problems after

treatment for prostate cancer, read our booklet, *Prostate cancer and your sex life*.

You can also speak to our Specialist Nurses, in confidence, on 0800 074 8383.

How do pelvic floor muscle exercises help?

The pelvic floor muscles stretch from the pubic bone at the front of your body to the bottom of your spine, below the bladder and bowel (see diagram below). They act as a sling, supporting the bladder and bowel and helping to control when you urinate (pee) or empty your bowels. Pelvic floor muscle exercises help to strengthen these muscles.



What problems can pelvic floor muscle exercises help with?

Strong pelvic floor muscles may help with some urinary problems, including:

- leaking urine – this could be just a few drops, or a steady flow throughout the day (urinary incontinence)
- leaking urine when you go to sit down or stand up, cough, sneeze or bend forwards (stress incontinence)
- a sudden urge to urinate (urgency), and sometimes leaking before you get to the toilet (urge incontinence)
- needing to urinate more often than usual (frequency), including several times at night (nocturia)
- dribbling urine after you finish urinating (after-dribble)
- leaking a little urine when you get sexually aroused.

Some men find pelvic floor muscle exercises help with problems getting or keeping an erection after treatment for prostate cancer. Some men also find they help to improve the quality of their erections.

The exercises may also help with bowel problems, such as needing to rush to the toilet, leakage (faecal incontinence), or passing a lot of wind.

What causes these problems?

There are many reasons why you might have urinary problems. For instance, you may have had certain treatments for prostate cancer, such as surgery to remove the prostate (radical prostatectomy). Or you may have had treatment for an enlarged prostate, such as an operation called a transurethral resection of the prostate (TURP).

Obesity, constipation (difficulty emptying your bowels) and coughing a lot – due to smoking, for example – can all put an extra strain on the pelvic floor muscles, which can make problems worse.

Some men might get bowel problems after radiotherapy to treat prostate cancer. And several treatments for prostate cancer, including surgery and radiotherapy, can cause erection problems.



I leaked a lot of urine for a few months after my keyhole surgery – a steady flow throughout the day and the night. But I'm fine now. I worked really hard on my pelvic floor and I'm convinced it was this that turned things around.

A personal experience

When should I start the exercises?

If you're going to have surgery for prostate cancer or an enlarged prostate, it's a good idea to start doing the exercises before the surgery. This will help you to do them properly after your treatment. It might also help you to stop leaking urine sooner.

After surgery, you'll have a tube called a catheter to drain urine from your bladder. If you're having surgery for prostate cancer, the catheter is usually removed after one to three weeks. After surgery for an enlarged prostate, the catheter is usually removed after two to three days. You can start doing pelvic floor muscle exercises again as soon as your catheter has been removed. They're safe to do, and won't hurt or cause any damage.

If you had your surgery a while ago but still have urinary problems, starting the exercises could still help. You should also speak to your doctor or nurse, as there may be other treatments that could help.

How do I find my pelvic floor muscles?

It's important to find the right muscles before you start doing pelvic floor muscle exercises. To do this, either sit, stand or lie down – whichever you find most comfortable – and relax your thighs and buttocks.

- Tighten the ring of muscle around the opening to your back passage (anus) as if you're trying to control wind. Then relax. Try not to squeeze your buttocks together, or tighten your thigh muscles or stomach (abdominal) muscles. And try not to hold your breath – just keep breathing normally.
- At the same time, imagine you're urinating and tighten your muscles as if you're trying to stop mid-flow, then relax. You can try this once or twice while you're actually urinating if this helps you to find the right muscles – but don't do this all the time as it could cause problems emptying your bladder.
- If you're tightening the right muscles, you should feel a dip at the base of your penis and feel your scrotum (the skin around the testicles) move up a little. You might find it helpful to do the exercises in front of a mirror to begin with, so you can see the base of your penis and your scrotum move.
- You can also check if you're using the right muscles by touching the skin just behind the scrotum. You should feel the muscles lift up and away from your fingers when you tighten them. If you feel the muscles pushing down, you aren't doing the exercises properly.

How do I do the exercises?

Make sure you've found the right muscles, and know how it should feel when you tighten them, before trying these exercises. There are two sets of exercises – slow and fast. You can do them while sitting, standing or lying down – whichever you prefer.

Slow pelvic floor muscle exercises

1. Slowly tighten the muscles as hard as you can so you feel a lifting sensation.
2. Try to hold this lift for ten seconds. Keep breathing normally.
3. Slowly relax the muscles and rest for ten seconds.
4. Aim to repeat the lift and rest up to ten times.

You might find that you can't hold the lift for ten seconds to start with. Just hold it for as long as you can and try to build up to ten seconds. It's more important to do the exercises properly than to do them for the full ten seconds.

Fast pelvic floor muscle exercises

1. Repeat the same action, but this time try tightening the muscles as quickly as possible.
2. Hold the lift for one second and then let go.
3. Try to do up to ten of these short, fast lifts.

Try to concentrate while you're doing the exercises. If you don't do them properly, they might not help.

If you'd like more advice on how to do pelvic floor muscle exercises, or you're finding them difficult, ask your doctor, nurse or GP to refer you to a continence advisor or specialist continence physiotherapist. They specialise in problems with leaking urine and can help you with the exercises.

How often should I do the exercises?

There's no fixed advice on how often you should do pelvic floor muscle exercises. Speak to your doctor or nurse to see what they suggest. You may want to try doing a set of slow and fast exercises three to six times a day. And try to make them part of your daily routine.

Don't overdo it. Pelvic floor muscles are like any other muscles – they can get tired if you do too many exercises. You might notice that you leak more urine towards the end of the day, as your muscles get tired. This should get better with time as the muscles get stronger.



I set an alarm on my smartphone to remind me to do my exercises – because it's so easy to forget.

A personal experience

It might help to tighten the pelvic floor muscles at certain times.

- **When you leak urine.** Tighten the muscles strongly before and during activities that cause you to leak urine – for example, when getting up from a chair, lifting, bending, coughing or sneezing. Tighten the muscles for as long as you can – over time, this might help to prevent urine leaking.
- **After urinating.** Tighten your pelvic floor muscles strongly after you urinate – this should get rid of any urine that's left in the urethra (the tube you urinate through) and avoid any dribbling afterwards.

It's important to be patient and keep doing the exercises. It takes time to see an improvement – it won't happen overnight. You might see a small improvement each week, but it can take up to three months before you notice a real difference. The exercises might not work for some men, but there are other things that might help if they don't work for you.

You'll need to keep doing the exercises for the rest of your life, but once your pelvic floor muscles are strong, you should be able to do fewer exercises. Keep doing some exercises each day – otherwise the muscles will get weaker again.



Pelvic floor exercises still work for me ten years after a radical prostatectomy.

A personal experience

What else can help?

The following tips might help you control when you urinate.

- If you often need to urinate during the night, try to drink less in the two hours before you go to bed.
- But make sure you drink plenty of fluids during the day (1.5-2 litres, or 3-4 pints a day). If your urine is dark, this could be a sign that you need to drink more.
- Avoid fizzy drinks, alcohol and drinks that contain caffeine (tea, coffee and cola), as these can irritate the bladder.
- If you get a sudden urge to urinate, try tightening your pelvic floor muscles and holding. Wait calmly until the urge passes, then walk slowly to the toilet. Don't rush as you walk, as this could make you more likely to leak urine.
- A technique called bladder retraining might also help if you get sudden urges to urinate. Read more about this in our Tool Kit fact sheet, **Urinary problems after prostate cancer treatment**.



You can also try to reduce the pressure on your pelvic floor muscles.



- Try to maintain a healthy weight and level of fitness. Being overweight can put pressure on your pelvic floor muscles – this could make you leak more urine. You may find our Tool Kit fact sheet, **Diet, physical activity and prostate cancer**, helpful.
- Physical activity can help you to stay fit and keep to a healthy weight. Some types – particularly pilates and yoga – also strengthen the pelvic floor muscles.
- Eat plenty of fibre and drink plenty of fluids to avoid constipation (difficulty emptying your bowels), as this can put pressure on your pelvic floor muscles.
- If you smoke, try to stop as this can cause coughing, which puts pressure on your pelvic floor muscles. NHS Choices has more information about stopping smoking.
- Speak to your doctor for help with hayfever, asthma or bronchitis to reduce sneezing and coughing.
- Avoid heavy lifting. If you have to lift something heavy, tighten your pelvic floor muscles at the same time. This can help to prevent leaking urine.

Biofeedback

This is a way of monitoring your pelvic floor muscle contractions while you do the exercises. Your continence advisor or specialist continence physiotherapist might suggest biofeedback if you're struggling to find the right muscles or to do the exercises. But many clinics don't offer biofeedback.

If you're offered biofeedback, your continence advisor or specialist continence physiotherapist will insert a small probe into your back passage. Tightening your pelvic floor muscles puts pressure on the probe. This pressure is displayed on a screen and shows if you're doing the exercises correctly.

Your continence advisor or physiotherapist will show you how to use biofeedback and help you do the exercises. They may lend you a biofeedback unit to take home.

More help dealing with urinary problems

Urinary problems can be hard to deal with. For more information on urinary problems, and on who can help, read our Tool Kit fact sheet,



Urinary problems after prostate cancer treatment.



You can also speak, in confidence, to our Specialist Nurses on 0800 074 8383. Or email them from our website at **prostatecanceruk.org** (click 'We can help').

More information

Bladder and Bowel Foundation

www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

Helpline: 0845 345 0165

Information and support for all types of bladder and bowel problems.

Chartered Physiotherapists Promoting Continence (CPPC)

cppc.csp.org.uk

Find details of private physiotherapists near you who specialise in continence problems.

Continence Product Advisor

www.continenceproductadvisor.org

Unbiased information on products for different continence problems, written by health professionals.

Disability Rights UK

www.disabilityrightsuk.org

Telephone: 0300 555 1525

Practical information guides about disability rights and benefits. And keys for accessible toilets across the UK.

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk

Information about treatments, conditions and lifestyle, including healthy eating, physical activity and stopping smoking.

NHS Direct Wales

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

Telephone: 0845 46 47

Provides health advice 24 hours a day, and lists local health services in Wales, including GPs.

NHS Inform

www.nhsinform.co.uk

Telephone: 0800 22 44 88

Provides health information and details of NHS and other support services in Scotland.

nidirect

www.nidirect.gov.uk

Information about government services in Northern Ireland, including health services.

PromoCon (Promoting Continence and Product Awareness)

www.promocon.co.uk

Helpline: 0161 607 8219

Impartial information and advice about bladder and bowel problems.

About us

Prostate Cancer UK fights to help more men survive prostate cancer and enjoy a better life.

This fact sheet is part of the Tool Kit. You can order more Tool Kit fact sheets, including an



A to Z of medical words, which explains some of the words and phrases used in this fact sheet.

Download and order our fact sheets and booklets from our website at **prostatecanceruk.org/publications** or call us on **0800 074 8383**.

At Prostate Cancer UK, we take great care to provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate facts about prostate cancer. We hope these will add to the medical advice you have had and help you to make decisions. Our services are not intended to replace advice from your doctor.

References to sources of information used in the production of this fact sheet are available at **prostatecanceruk.org**

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If you have any comments about our publications, you can email:

literature@prostatecanceruk.org



Speak to our Specialist Nurses

0800 074 8383*

prostatecanceruk.org

Donate today – help others like you

Did you find this information useful? Would you like to help others in your situation access the facts they need? Every year, 40,000 men face a prostate cancer diagnosis. Thanks to our generous supporters, we offer information free to all who need it. If you would like to help us continue this service, please consider making a donation. Your gift could fund the following services:

- £10 could buy a Tool Kit – a set of fact sheets, tailored to the needs of each man with vital information on diagnosis, treatment and lifestyle.
- £25 could give a man diagnosed with a prostate problem unlimited time to talk over treatment options with one of our Specialist Nurses.

To make a donation of any amount, please call us on **0800 082 1616**, visit prostatecanceruk.org/donations or **text PROSTATE to 70004***.

There are many other ways to support us. For more details please visit prostatecanceruk.org/get-involved

**You can donate up to £10 via SMS and we will receive 100% of your donation. Texts are charged at your standard rate. For full terms and conditions and more information, please visit prostatecanceruk.org/terms



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Call our Specialist Nurses from Mon to Fri 9am - 6pm, Wed 10am - 8pm

* Calls are recorded for training purposes only.

Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Prostate Cancer UK.

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