

## Pelvic Muscle Exercises

Pelvic muscles exercises, also known as “PMEs” or Kegel exercises, are effective in strengthening the pelvic floor muscles which support the uterus, bladder and bowel. These muscles are important to maintaining both bladder and bowel continence. Both women and men can benefit from doing these exercises as a first line approach to improving and maintaining continence.

Here’s how:

### 1. Locate the Pelvic Floor Muscles

The pelvic floor muscles are located in the base of your pelvis between your pubic bone and tailbone. Locate your pelvic floor muscles by imagining you are trying to hold back gas or stop a urine stream. You should feel the muscles around your rectum tighten and women will feel a lifting sensation around the vagina. Or, women can try another technique: insert a finger inside the vagina and try to squeeze the surrounding muscles. You should feel the vagina tighten and the pelvic floor move upward. As you relax your muscles, you will feel your pelvic floor move down to the beginning position.

### 2. Perfect Your Technique

Kegel exercises consist of both tightening and relaxing your pelvic floor muscles. It is important to control both when your muscles tighten and when they relax in order to do the exercises correctly. Make sure to relax the muscles for the same amount of time you contract or tighten them.

- Once you've identified your pelvic floor muscles, empty your bladder and sit, stand or lie down. In fact, you may want to exercise in all three positions:

- Sitting – Sit upright in a firm, straight-back chair, with knees slightly apart, feet flat on the floor or legs stretched out in front and crossed at the ankles.
- Lying Down – Lie flat on your back or with your head on a pillow, knees bent and feet slightly apart. It is helpful to support your knees with a pillow.
- Standing – Stand by a chair, knees slightly bent, with feet shoulder-width apart and toes pointed slightly outward. You can also lean on a kitchen counter with your hips flexed.

If you experience a loss of urine in one position only, such as when you are standing, then increase the number of exercises for that position, or do an additional set of exercises each day with the focus on doing the exercises in that position only.

- Tighten your pelvic floor muscle and hold the contraction for a count of 3 seconds, then relax the muscle completely for a count of 3 seconds. Repeat 10 times and do this three times a day.

- Once you've perfected three-second muscle contractions, try it for four seconds at a time, alternating muscle contractions with a four-second rest period. Work up to keeping the muscles contracted for 10 seconds at a time, relaxing for 10 seconds between contractions. Remember to repeat each set 10 times, and to exercise three times each day.

- For maximum benefit, focus on tightening only your pelvic floor muscles. Avoid flexing the muscles in your abdomen, thighs or buttocks and avoid holding your breath. Relax, breathe normally and focus on contracting the muscles around your vagina and/or rectum.

- For variety, try these alternatives:

- Mini-Kegels – Count quickly to 10 or 20, contracting and relaxing your pelvic floor muscles each time you say a number.
- The Elevator – Gradually contract and release your pelvic floor muscles one at a time. As you contract, visualize an elevator traveling up four floors. At each floor, contract your muscles a little more until you reach maximum contraction at the fourth floor. Hold the contraction and then slowly release the tension as you imagine the elevator returning to the first floor. Repeat 10 times.

### **3. Make it a Habit!**

As with any muscle, if you don't use it, you'll lose it! To make sure you perform PME or Kegel exercises regularly, you may find it helpful to exercise while doing common daily activities, such as:

- Watching television (especially during commercials!)
- Checking email or while on the computer
- Brushing your teeth or showering
- Commuting to work
- Talking on the telephone
- Waiting in line at the bank, hardware store or grocery store
- Washing dishes
- Playing cards
- Reading

### **4. Use PMEs/Kegels to Prevent Leaks**

Any activity that increases pressure in your abdomen – such as coughing, sneezing or laughing; bending, lifting and carrying objects; sitting down or standing up; or going up or down stairs – may cause leakage. Here are some ways to use Kegel exercises to improve your continence during these activities:

- Tighten your pelvic muscles just before these activities.
- During brief activities like a cough, tighten your muscles until you finish, then relax.
- For prolonged activities, tighten during the most stressful moments, or tighten on and off during the entire activity.
- Contract your pelvic floor muscle prior to rising from a sitting position and keep muscles contracted until you are standing.

### **5. Seeing Results**

You should notice improvement after 4 to 6 weeks of daily Kegel exercises. The more PMEs you do, the stronger your pelvic muscles will become; the faster they will get stronger; and it will be easier to maintain pelvic muscle floor strength. It is important to make PMEs part of your daily routine so that you do not lose the muscle strength – and improved continence – that you worked so hard to gain.

### **6. Need Help?**

If you're unsure about locating the pelvic floor muscles or how to do pelvic muscle exercises (Kegels), ask your healthcare provider. There's no need to be embarrassed, as they are trained to talk with you candidly and confidentially about how to improve your continence.