

## PATIENT INFORMATION

# Exercises for Breathing and Pelvic Floor Relaxation

### What is Pelvic Floor Muscle tension/overactivity?

Like other muscle groups in the body, the pelvic floor muscle has a range of movement. When we contract, or tighten, the pelvic floor muscle it should lift and when we let go of the contraction the muscles should return to their resting position.

Pelvic floor muscles can become tight or go into spasm from overactivity. When muscles are not able to let go this can lead to pelvic dysfunctions such as pain, bladder irritation and constipation. Muscles function well when they are allowed a break. They need to relax to allow good blood flow, which brings oxygen and nutrient supplies.

It is important to have strong pelvic floor muscles, they support your pelvic organs and control your continence and bowel movements. There is a difference between a strong pelvic floor muscle and an overactive or tense pelvic floor muscle.

### What are the signs and symptoms of an overactive pelvic floor muscle?

- Sudden urge to urinate, even when the bladder is not full
- Difficulty starting to the flow of urine
- Sensations of not being able to completely empty your bladder
- Urinary incontinence
- Constipation, especially difficulty emptying and needing to strain
- Bowel incontinence
- Pain in the pelvis
- Pain with intimate relationships
- Difficulty and/or pain with vaginal/rectal examinations or difficulty inserting tampons
- Difficulty achieving and maintaining erections
- Difficulty/pain doing pelvic floor strengthening exercises

Understandably these symptoms can be very stressful and increase anxiety and tension. This in turn can further provoke the pelvic floor muscle tension and make symptoms worse. It is likely that if you have held tension in your pelvic floor muscles for any period of time that your brain will have learnt that this is 'normal' for you. Therefore, the first important step is to become aware of this and allow your brain to recognise it and allow change.

## What can I do to help?

### Deep breathing exercises

Diaphragmatic breathing is a relaxing type of breathing and optimal for relaxing and lengthening the pelvic floor muscle.

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position with your body well supported
2. Place one hand on your lower tummy and the other hand on your breastbone.
3. Gently breathe in through your nose and imagine the air filling your stomach so that your lower hand gently rises. You may also feel your ribs gently widening and move upwards.
4. Focus on breathing into your tummy so that your lower hand rises and falls and your upper hand stays relatively still
5. As you breath out allow the ribs and tummy to gently fall back to their original resting position. Try not to force either the breath in or out
6. If you are can try to inhale to a count of 4 and similarly breath out for 4, increasing this to 8 with practice.



### Lower abdominal muscle relaxation

- Like in the deep breathing exercise above, position your hands over your lower abdomen
- As you breath in allow the lower abdomen to relax and bulge forwards into your hands
- Placing a weight on your tummy can help



## Pelvic floor muscle relaxation

It can be really difficult to tell if your pelvic floor muscles are contracted or relaxed. Try to think about your pelvic floor muscles and notice any tension or sensations in and around the openings of your pelvic floor. Consider the feeling around your anus and around your urethra (the opening where you pass urine). In females consider the vaginal opening and sensations here. As the pelvic floor muscle relaxes the pelvic floor should move downwards without straining.

There are various visualisations that be helpful in allowing your pelvic floor muscles to fully 'relax':

1. INHALE: Rose bud petals softly opening. EXHALE: Petals drawing back together
2. INHALE: Imagine your sit bones gently spreading apart and your tailbone floats back. EXHALE: draw your sit bones towards each other and imagine tucking your tailbone (tail) underneath
3. Some people find it helpful to place a hand over the pelvic floor and feel the difference in pressures

The diaphragm, abdominal and pelvic floor muscles all work together.

INHALE	EXHALE
Tummy softens and expands	Tummy comes back towards body
Sitting bones widen, soften, float away from each other	Sitting bones come back together in the centre
Tailbone lengthens away from the pubic bone	Tailbone returns and tucks under
Pelvic floor muscles lengthen and descend	Pelvic floor muscles return to their resting position

These exercises can take real concentration so put some quiet time aside to really focus on the coordination required. Once you are more confident they can be performed in any position and will contribute to improved overall function of your pelvic floor muscle.

## Total body relaxation

Anxiety and stress can cause tension in your pelvic floor muscle. When we are stressed to tend to breath differently, the breath is shallower and faster and the diaphragm doesn't descend slowly and fully. The exercises are very simple but need time and dedication to maximise their benefits.

- Find a comfortable environment or make yourself comfortable in a not so ideal environment. It's important that you can adapt to different settings.
- If it is possible then dimming the lights and switching off distractions can be helpful
- 'Scan' your body for areas that hold tension, recognise it and allow them to soften and 'let go'. It is common for us to clench our jaw without even realising and this can be linked with tension within the pelvic floor muscle. Try releasing your jaw tension, it helps to place your tongue on the roof of your mouth with your teeth slightly apart

- Work your way through each area of your body, softening and releasing as you go.
- You may also like to try the 'Mitchell Method of Relaxation' (references at the end of the leaflet)

### **Is there anything else that I can do to help?**

Specialist Pelvic Health Physiotherapists have the skills to be able to further assess and treat pelvic floor muscle tension. Some patients benefit from specific stretches and/or muscle releases. Occasionally dilators or pelvic floor release wands/tools can be useful to help achieve optimal pelvic floor muscle length.

### **Useful resources:**

- Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust have a number of excellent videos to aid relaxation and provide further information on pelvic floor relaxation: <http://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/?s=relaxation>
- There is a short video by Physiotherapist Michelle Kenway on YouTube under the title "[Pelvic Floor Relaxation Exercises for Pelvic Pain](#)"
- Pelvic floor relaxation and 'letting go' exercises: [www.pelvicphysiotherapy.com/release-exercises](http://www.pelvicphysiotherapy.com/release-exercises)
- Pelvic Obstetric Gynaecology Physiotherapy website [POGP \(thepogp.co.uk\)](http://thepogp.co.uk) The Mitchell Method of Relaxation leaflet.
- Jilly Bond [www.jillybond.com](http://www.jillybond.com) on various pelvic floor conditions

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