

## Pelvic health physiotherapy

# Overactive Pelvic Floor

## Information for patients, families and carers

### Introduction

This leaflet provides information and advice about overactive pelvic floor. We hope it will answer some of the questions you or those who care for you may have. This leaflet is not meant to replace the discussion between you and your medical team but aims to help you understand more about what you have discussed.

### What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor muscles are a group of muscles which start at your tailbone and form a sling underneath your back and front passage to insert into your pubic bone.

The pelvic floor muscles are responsible for:

- supporting your pelvic organs including your bladder and rectum
- assisting bladder and bowel control
- sexual pleasure and function

Therefore, it is very important for our pelvic floor to function well.

### What is an overactive pelvic floor?

An overactive pelvic floor is when the pelvic floor muscles do not adequately relax, when they are supposed to. For example, when passing urine or faeces.

An overactive pelvic floor can occur because the muscles have tightened, similar to the way other muscles in the body do.

### What can cause overactive pelvic floor?

- weakness of the pelvic floor muscles
- trauma to the pelvis or pelvic floor
- inflammation to pelvic region
- recurrent infections or cystitis
- pelvic surgeries including hysterectomy, prolapse surgeries, prostatectomy, prostatitis
- anxiety and stress
- sexual pain associated with vulvodynia, vaginismus, painful bladder syndrome and endometriosis
- the cause cannot always be explained

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## What symptoms may occur with overactive pelvic floor?

- pain anywhere in the pelvic region
- bladder urgency, frequency and leaking on the way to pass urine
- problems with passing urine and emptying the bladder
- constipation or faecal incontinence
- painful sex
- problems with sexual function such as orgasms or erection

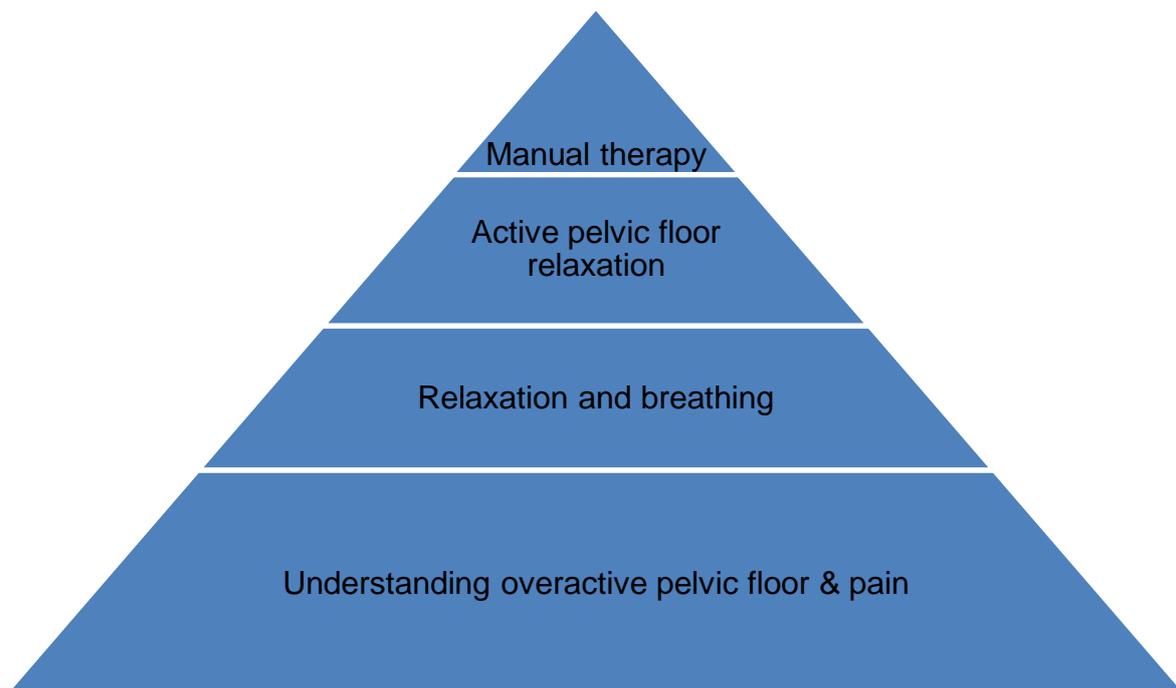
## How is overactive pelvic floor diagnosed?

- a verbal assessment of your symptoms
- by ruling out other conditions affecting the pelvic floor
- with palpation/ examination of pelvic floor muscles and pelvic floor muscle control

## What is the treatment for overactive pelvic floor?

Pelvic floor 'down-training' involves a combination of relaxation techniques for the muscles. This may help you develop the skill to be able to actively relax and control the pelvic floor muscles.

Below is a pyramid of treatments for overactive pelvic floor starting from the essentials at the bottom and progressing towards the top of the pyramid



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## Understanding pain associated with an overactive pelvic floor

Pelvic floor pain is common. 1 in 6 people experience pelvic pain during their lifetime.

When muscles work too hard, for too long they can contribute towards pain. The same is true of the pelvic floor. If the pelvic floor is constantly tense, it limits blood flow resulting in the build-up of chemicals. This may worsen the painful symptoms or mean that the muscle is 'over active' in its resting state. It is important to know that overactive pelvic floor is a symptom of pelvic pain, and not usually a primary cause of the pain. The pain you are experiencing is not because the pelvic floor muscles are damaged or harmed, but because of the complex pain systems we possess.

Pain is complex and is influenced by a number of things, for example; expectations, previous experiences, genetics, beliefs and mood. Over time, pain can become amplified, leading to pain that persists even after the original cause has passed. The pain is very real, but is no longer because of any tissue damage or irritation, a bit like an over-sensitive car alarm that keeps going off for no reason.

In addition, our experiences can be associated with pain, as our brain stores this as a memory. In the future, our brain can associate an event with the memory and may reproduce the same pain or feelings, despite a non-painful stimulus.

Therefore, you can experience pain in your pelvic floor even when an event is not truly harmful. This is our bodies' way of avoiding pain in most situations, but sometimes this can be unhelpful. This is known as allodynia, which is a heightened response to a non-painful stimulus such as touch.

Pelvic floor down training aims to change the pain systems connection to the pelvic floor and relax the sympathetic 'fight or flight' nervous system and the pelvic floor muscles. It also aims to give you control over the behaviour of the pelvic floor.

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## Physiotherapy treatment

Below are some treatments that can help overactive pelvic floor. Your physiotherapist will guide you through which are best for you

## Mindfulness/ relaxation

The first step of treating the overactive pelvic floor is to take some time to be calm and still, as we know that stress can be one of the main contributing factors towards the pelvic floor over activity.

Mindfulness is the state in which we slow down and become aware of our thoughts, emotions and body. This practice takes time to develop and is different for each person.

Begin by finding a quiet space and adding personal touches or elements that help you to relax e.g., a candle, a bath, a hot water bottle, calm music or dim lights. Use one of the programmes suggested below to guide your meditation. Starting with 10 minutes, 1-2 times a day and building this up to be able to complete at least 60 minutes a week.

Below are some resources that can aid your mindfulness practice:

- Tai Chi classes
- Yoga Classes
- Calm app
- Headspace app
- Smiling Mind app
- Breath works app
- Catch it app
- Thrive app
- Feeling good: positive mind-set app

Please note this is not an exhaustive list of resources but all are NHS endorsed.

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## Belly breathing

The next skill to develop is the ability to take big and full breaths into our stomach. We know that our breath is the only element of our sympathetic 'fight or flight' nervous system that we control. Therefore, mastering the correct belly breathe plays a crucial role in improving the overactive pelvic floor. The physical contraction of the diaphragm, during inhalation, also causes the pelvic floor muscles to move downwards. Studies have shown reduced stress hormones in individuals who regularly complete deep breathing exercises, which reduces the activation of the body's 'fight or flight' system.

This may feel different or strange to begin with, especially if this is a new way of breathing for you. Start by lying on your back with your knees bent up, in a quiet/relaxing environment with either both hands either on your abdomen or with one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen.

As you breathe in, your hand/s on your abdomen should rise as you expand and fill your lungs to the bottom of your rib cage whilst your chest and shoulders should remain still and relaxed.

As you breathe out, your abdomen should relax back to its resting position. Throughout every breath, your abdomen and abdominal muscles should remain relaxed and uncontracted.

Breathe in



Breathe out



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## Pelvic stretches

These are designed to stretch the muscles inside and around the pelvis that are closely related to the pelvic floor muscles.

Take the movements to a point of a stretch feeling but not pain. Hold each stretch for 30 seconds, keep breathing into your belly, and out slowly throughout the stretch.

Remember to do both left and right sides, up to three times each. The exercises will be most helpful when done every day.



### **Knee to chest**

Start by lying on your back with both legs straight. Bend one knee to your chest. Hold for 30 seconds.



### **Knee to opposite shoulder**

Start by lying flat. Bring your left knee to your chest and diagonally to the opposite shoulder. Hold for 30 seconds.



### **Foot and knee up**

Start by lying down with your knees bent. Bring your right foot to the front of your left knee, then lift your left knee towards your chest. Hold for 30 seconds.



### **Knee over to hand**

Start by lying flat. Bring your left knee over your body to the floor near your right hand, which can hold the knee down. Hold for 30 seconds.

### **Flat frog**

Start by lying flat with the soles of your feet together and knees falling apart. Bring your feet comfortably close to your bottom. Hold for 30 seconds and breathe deeply into your belly.



### **Child's pose**

Begin on all fours. Relax your bottom down towards your heels – your knees are wider apart, feet closer together. Rest your head on the floor. Hold for 30 seconds.

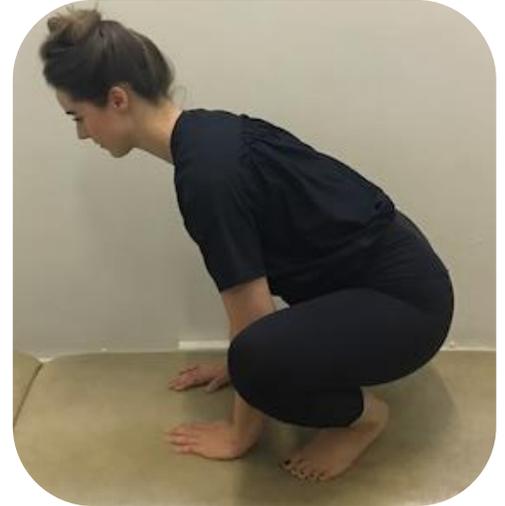


### **Happy baby**

Start by lying flat. Grasp the inside of each foot with your hands inside your knees. Allow your knees to widen apart. Hold for 30 seconds.

### **Relaxed frog**

Start with your weight on your hands and feet. Relax your bottom down between your heels. Using your elbows, gently push your knees apart. Hold for 30 seconds.



## **The pelvic floor drop/relaxation**

The pelvic floor 'drop' is the downward motion of the pelvic floor as it relaxes from its overactive state. Your physiotherapist will guide you on this and most likely teach you during an examination.

Once you have completed your belly breaths, mindfulness and stretches you are in a good position to begin to complete the drop.

Try to imagine you are letting go of wind through your back passage and releasing tension around your anus and pelvic floor. It can help to do a small squeeze/lift of your pelvic floor and then focus on fully relaxing the muscles around your bottom and perineum. Additionally, a deep sigh exhalation can assist with this relaxation.

It can take some time to develop this skill and control over this muscle.

Once you have mastered the drop technique we encourage you to complete this regularly throughout the day as often as you can.

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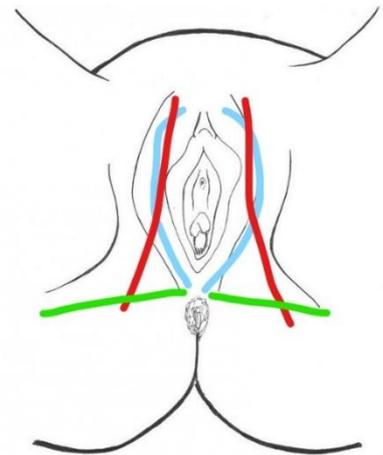
## Superficial pelvic floor massage

External massage of the surface level pelvic floor muscles gradually exposes you to touch and allows the area to become less sensitive and painful, whilst increasing the circulation to the tissues.

**Your physiotherapist will guide you through this so please do not commence this until advised.**

Consider completing following a warm bath or shower when you are nice and relaxed.

- Ensure you have short nails and clean hands and use a natural oil-based lubricant e.g., olive oil when performing external massage.
- Get yourself into a comfortable position, supported by pillows so you are relaxed.
- You could use a mirror to assist you with the massage.
- Using your index and middle fingers apply gentle pressure along the three directions shown below demonstrated in red, blue and green (your physiotherapist will demonstrate these with you). As you feel more comfortable and less pain you can gradually increase the pressure applied to the external vaginal muscles.
- Aim to complete this for 3-4 minutes at least 3 times a week. Similarly, to the above exercises this will be most effective if completed every day.



## Internal Vaginal Massage

Once you are comfortable completing external vaginal massage the next step would be to complete internal massage. Your physiotherapist will discuss this with you and coach you through this. **As with external massage, do not commence this unless advised to by your physiotherapist.**

- Ensure you have short nails and clean hands and use a natural oil-based lubricant e.g., olive oil when performing internal massage.
- Get yourself into a comfortable position, supported by pillows so you are relaxed.
- Insert one finger into your vagina 2-5cm into your vagina. Start with a gentle sweeping movement applying gentle pressure from three to nine o'clock on a clock face.
- Additionally, you can apply gentle downward stretches to the left and right side of the bottom of the vagina. Using the pad of your index finger, you can provide a gentle stretch for 30 seconds (less if you cannot tolerate 30 seconds). Your therapist will demonstrate this for you.

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## How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at [pals@imperial.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@imperial.nhs.uk). The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to express your concerns in **writing** to:

Complaints department  
Fourth floor  
Salton House  
St Mary's Hospital  
Praed Street  
Londo W2 1NY

## Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print, as a sound recording, in Braille, or in alternative languages. Please contact the communications team on **020 3312 5592**.

## Wi-fi

We have a free wi-fi service for basic filtered browsing and a premium wi-fi service (requiring payment) at each of our five hospitals.

Look for WiFiSPARK\_FREE or WiFiSPARK\_PREMIUM