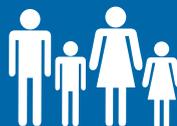


# ONE IN THREE WOMEN WHO EVER HAD A BABY WET THEMSELVES



Australian Government  
Department of Health





**ONE IN THREE  
WOMEN WHO EVER HAD A BABY  
WET THEMSELVES**

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**A free copy of this booklet can be obtained by calling the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66.**

For more information, go to [bladderbowel.gov.au](http://bladderbowel.gov.au) or [continence.org.au](http://continence.org.au)

This book is intended as a general overview only and is no substitute for professional assessment and care.

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**NATIONAL  
CONTINENCE  
MANAGEMENT  
STRATEGY**

# Bladder Control

One in three women who have ever had a baby will experience incontinence. The more babies you have, the greater the risk of leaking urine.

This booklet provides information and advice on how to manage, and in many cases cure incontinence after pregnancy.

## Why do you leak urine after having a baby?

The baby stretches the nerves and pelvic floor muscles that keep the bladder shut as it moves through the birth canal.

It is rare for the bladder itself to be damaged during birth but the muscles and nerves are often over stretched. The muscles can sometimes be left weak and cannot keep all the urine in the bladder. The bladder then leaks.

Leaking happens mostly when you cough, sneeze, lift or do exercise. You may feel a strong urge to empty your bladder. You may also have trouble holding on.

You need to do pelvic floor muscle training to help the muscles get stronger again.

## Will this leaking go away by itself?

Leaking will not go away if you just ignore it. Train your pelvic floor muscles to help get their strength back. Then the leaking is likely to stop.

You may start wetting yourself if you do not get your pelvic floor muscle strength back after each baby. This gets even worse as the pelvic floor muscles get weaker with age.

## How does my bladder work?

The bladder is a hollow, muscular pump. It fills slowly with urine from the kidneys. The urethra (urine tube) is kept closed by a ring of muscle called the sphincter. When the bladder holds 300-400mls of urine, you get the urge to pass urine. When you sit on the toilet, the sphincter and pelvic floor muscles relax. Then the bladder squeezes the urine out. After this, the same 'fill and empty' cycle begins again.

# How can I be sure that I have good bladder habits?

## Step 1 - Use good toilet habits

- It is normal to go to the toilet four to six times each day;
- Don't get into the habit of going to the toilet 'just in case'. Try to go to the toilet only when your bladder is full;
- You should pass about 300-400ml each time you go to the toilet; and
- It is OK to get up once each night to pass urine. Try not to go just because you have to get up to the baby.

## Step 2 – Look after your pelvic floor muscles

- Keep your pelvic floor muscles strong with pelvic floor muscle exercises.

## Step 3 – Keep good bowel habits

- Avoid constipation;
- Do not strain when using your bowels. This puts extra load onto your pelvic floor muscles and may weaken the muscles. The pelvic floor muscles help with bladder and bowel control;
- Eat two pieces of fruit and five serves of vegetables daily; and
- Keep active. Physical activity helps to keep your bowels regular.

## Step 4 – Drink fluid every day

- Fluid is everything you drink. Fluid includes milk, juice and soup. The best fluid to drink is water; and
- Reduce intake of caffeine drinks (coffee, tea), alcohol and fizzy beverages. These drinks can irritate your bladder.

## Step 5 – Seek Help

Seek help from your doctor, continence physiotherapist or continence nurse advisor if you:

- wet yourself when you cough, sneeze, laugh or lift, even if it is only a few drops;
- leak when you stand up or do sports or other activity;
- have an urgent need to pass urine and you:
  - have a strong feeling of not being able to hold on; and
  - leak on the way to the toilet; and
  - don't always get to the toilet on time.
- need to rush when you need to go to the toilet;
- pass small amounts of urine often through the day;
- have to strain to pass urine;
- have finished passing urine and your bladder is not empty; and
- have a stream that stops and starts instead of a smooth flow.

# Pelvic floor muscles

## What are the pelvic muscles?

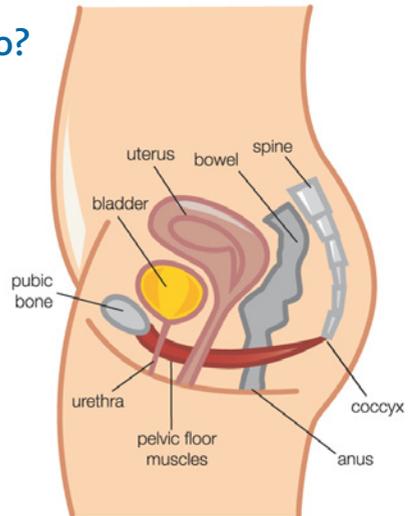
The floor of the pelvis is made up of layers of muscle and other tissue. These layers stretch like a hammock from the tailbone at the back to the pubic bone at the front.

## What do my pelvic muscles do?

Look at the picture of the pelvic floor.

The pelvic floor muscles:

- lift the bladder;
- squeeze around the vagina and the rectum (back passage); and
- help to hold the bladder, the uterus (womb) and bowel (colon) in their proper place.



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## What happens if my pelvic floor muscles are weak after having my baby?

Any of the following things might happen.

You might:

- leak urine when you cough, sneeze, lift, laugh or do exercise;
- not be able to control your wind;
- often feel a strong and urgent need to empty your bladder or your bowel; or
- not have good support for the bladder, your uterus or your bowel.

## Pelvic organ prolapse

Without good support one or more of your pelvic organs might sag down into your vagina. This is called pelvic organ prolapse.

Prolapse is very common. It happens to about one in ten women in Australia. Women feel heaviness, or a bulging or dragging in the vagina. Across the lifespan, one in five women may require surgery if these symptoms are a bother.

See your doctor if you are concerned.

## Pelvic Floor Muscle Training

### Where are my pelvic floor muscles?

The first thing to do is to find out which muscles you need to train. Here are two things you can try:

- Sit or lie down with the muscles of your thighs, buttocks and stomach relaxed. Squeeze the ring of muscle around the anus (back passage) as if you are trying to stop passing wind. Now relax this muscle. Squeeze and let go a couple of times to be sure you have found the right muscles. Remember, do not squeeze your buttocks; and
- Try to stop the stream of urine when sitting on the toilet to empty your bladder. Then start your stream again. You can do this to learn which muscles are the right ones to use - **but do this only once a week**. Your bladder may not empty the way it should if you stop and start your stream too often. You need active pelvic floor muscles to be able to stop your urine flow.

If you do not feel a distinct 'squeeze and lift' of your pelvic floor muscles when you try to squeeze, ask for help from your continence physiotherapist or continence nurse advisor. They will help you to get your pelvic floor muscles working the right way.

Even women with very weak pelvic floor muscles can be helped by pelvic floor muscle training.

## How do I do pelvic floor muscle training?

Now that you can feel the pelvic floor muscles working, you can:

- squeeze and draw in the muscles around your anus (back passage) and vagina at the same time. Lift them UP inside. Feel a sense of lift each time you squeeze your pelvic floor muscles. Hold them strong and tight as you count to eight. Then, let them go and relax. You should have a distinct feeling of letting go;
- repeat the squeeze and lift and letting go. It is best to rest for about eight seconds in between each lift up of the muscles. If you can't hold for the count of eight, just hold for as long as you can;
- repeat this squeeze and lift as many times as you can. Try to aim for between eight and twelve squeezes;
- try to do three sets of eight to twelve squeezes each, with a rest in between. A training program is three sets of up to eight to twelve squeezes;
- do your whole training program each day. Try sets while lying down, sitting or standing; and
- use 'the knack'. This is when you brace your pelvic floor muscles by squeezing up and holding each time before you cough, sneeze or lift anything.

While doing pelvic floor muscle training:

- do not hold your breath;
- only squeeze and lift;
- do not tighten your buttocks; and
- keep your thighs relaxed.

## Do your pelvic floor muscle training the right way

Fewer strong squeezes are better than a lot of half-hearted ones. Ask for help from your continence physiotherapist or continence nurse advisor if you are not sure you are doing the squeezes right.

Seek help if you do not see a change in symptoms after three months.

## Keeping track of your progress

Use the table below to keep track of your progress.

| Actions                                  | Birth - 1 month | 1-3 months | 3-6 months | 8-12 months |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| I can hold for how many seconds?         |                 |            |            |             |
| How many squeezes in a row can I do now? |                 |            |            |             |

## How can I remember to do my exercises?

The hardest thing about pelvic floor exercises is remembering to do them.

Make a regular time every day to do your pelvic floor muscle squeezes.

This might be when you:

- go to the toilet;
- wash your hands;
- have a drink;
- change the baby;
- feed the baby; and
- have a shower.

# How can I care for my pelvic floor muscles?

The birth of a baby might have stretched your pelvic floor muscles. Any 'pushing down' actions in the first weeks after the baby's birth might stretch the pelvic floor muscles again. You can help to protect your pelvic floor muscles by not pushing down on your pelvic floor.

Here are a few ideas to help you:

- Use 'the knack' for every cough, sneeze, or lift;
- Cross your legs and squeeze them tightly together before each cough or sneeze;
- Share the lifting of heavy loads;
- Don't strain when using your bowels;
- Avoid bouncing exercises;
- Make your pelvic floor muscles stronger through training;
- Avoid constipation; and
- Even if you have a problem with wetting yourself, you should keep on with gentle exercises, walking or swimming.

## Sex after pregnancy

Your pelvic floor muscles not only play a part in bladder and bowel control, they also help you feel your partner and be able to respond during sex.

The time taken to resume sexual intercourse varies from days to weeks or months. There is no normal or recommended time to start again. Many factors will influence when you are ready to start intercourse again.

After the birth, you will feel very tired and busy with your baby. Vaginal birth can cause weakness around the vagina. The vagina may lack feeling. Vaginal tears and trauma can cause pain for many months. While breast feeding hormones can make your vagina dry.

If you do have concerns like this your GP or health professional are well able to give you advice about any of these problems.



# Seek help

## If things do not get any better, seek help

Speak to your doctor if any of the following problems are not getting better:

- any leaking of urine;
- the need to rush to get to the toilet to pass urine;
- the need to rush to go to the toilet to open your bowels;
- not being able to hold on when you want to;
- not being able to control passing wind;
- burning or stinging inside when you pass urine; or
- having to strain to start the flow of urine.

The pelvic floor muscles may take up to six months to get better after childbirth. You should speak to your doctor, continence physiotherapist or continence nurse advisor if things are not any better after three months.

Enjoy your pregnancy and your baby. Both before and after your baby is born, remember that it is important to take care of yourself.

Call the National Continence Helpline  
on FREECALL™ 1800 33 00 66  
(8am-8pm monday to Friday AEST)



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The helpline has a team of clinical advisors providing free, confidential advice, resources, details for local continence services, products and subsidies.

For more information, you can also visit:

[www.continence.org.au](http://www.continence.org.au)

[www.toiletmap.gov.au](http://www.toiletmap.gov.au)

[www.bladderbowel.gov.au](http://www.bladderbowel.gov.au)

[www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au](http://www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au)

\*Calls from mobiles are charged at applicable rates.



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