

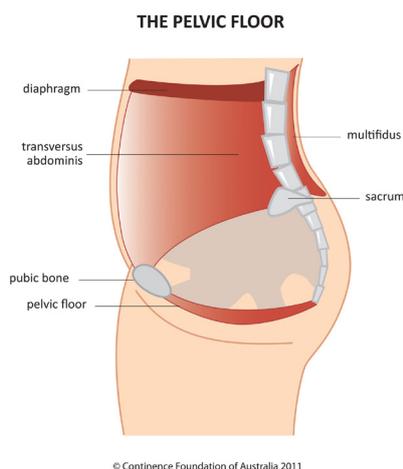
# The pelvic floor and resistance exercises

## Exercising for good health

Exercise plays a key role in your health as it improves your body's fitness and mental wellbeing. Resistance training strengthens and tones your muscles and plays a key role in keeping your bones strong. One size does not fit all when it comes to exercise and your exercise program needs to be tailored to suit your needs. If you have, or are at risk of, pelvic floor problems, there are some things that you need to be aware of.

## What is the pelvic floor?

Pelvic floor muscles form the base of the group of muscles commonly called the core. These muscles work with the deep abdominal (tummy) and back muscles, and the diaphragm (breathing muscle) to support the spine and control the pressure inside the abdomen. The pelvic floor muscles play an important role in supporting the pelvic organs, bladder and bowel control and sexual function, in both men and women.



## How do I know if I have a pelvic floor problem?

Common signs and symptoms of a problem with your pelvic floor include:

- accidentally leaking urine when you exercise, laugh, cough or sneeze
- needing to get to the toilet in a hurry or not making it there in time
- the need to frequently go to the toilet
- finding it difficult to empty your bladder or bowel
- accidental loss of faeces or wind

- a prolapse
  - > in women, this may be felt as bulging into the vagina, heaviness or discomfort, or a feeling of pulling, dragging or dropping down
  - > in men, this may be noticed as a bulging coming out of the rectum, a feeling of needing to use your bowels but not needing to go
- pelvic pain
- pain during sexual intercourse
- poor sensation or loss of bladder control during sexual intercourse.

## Are you at risk of pelvic floor problems?

You are at greatest risk of pelvic floor problems if you are in one or more of the groups below:

- pregnant and postnatal women
- women who have ever had a baby
- menopausal and post menopausal women
- women who have had gynaecological surgery (e.g. hysterectomy)
- men who have had surgery for prostate cancer
- elite athletes (e.g. runners, gymnasts).

Your risk is more if you tick one or more of the following:

- you regularly lift heavy weights (e.g. at the gym or as part of your job)
- you strain often to empty your bowels (constipation)
- you have a chronic cough or sneeze due to asthma, smoking or hayfever
- you are overweight or have a Body Mass Index greater than 25
- you have had trauma to the pelvis area (e.g. a fall, pelvic radiotherapy)
- you have a history of back pain.

If you are in one of these at-risk groups or have symptoms of pelvic floor problems, it is important your exercise program is pelvic floor safe. Protecting your pelvic floor now will save you problems in the future.

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## Pelvic floor safe resistance exercises

- Seated exercises (e.g. shoulder press, rows, bicep curls, knee extensions)
- Dumbbell triceps extensions (lying or one arm and leg propped on bench)
- Dumbbell exercises on a Swiss ball
- Shallow and narrow leg squats
- Shallow Swiss ball wall squats
- Prone leg curl
- Shallow forward lunges
- Dumbbell row
- Pec deck
- Supine bench/Swiss ball press
- Wall push ups
- Floor bridge

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## Resistance exercises to avoid

- Abdominal exercises (e.g. sit ups, curl ups, crunches, double leg lifts, exercises on machines)
- Medicine ball rotations
- Deep lunges or side lunges
- Wide-legged or deep squats
- Jump squats
- Lifting or pressing heavy weights
- Lat pull down with heavy weights
- Leg press machine with heavy weights
- Dead lifts
- High-bench step up/step down
- Exercises with both feet off the ground (e.g. chin ups, tricep dips)
- Full push ups
- Any exercise where there is direct downward pressure on the pelvic floor

Please note, while these exercises are pelvic floor safe, you will also need to consider the number of repetitions, weight lifted, number of sets, length of rest and your fatigue level, which also affects your pelvic floor function.

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## Your pelvic floor and resistance exercises

Your body muscle strength may exceed the ability of your pelvic floor. If you have, or are at risk of, pelvic floor problems, it is important you train for the “weakest link” and put your pelvic floor first. There are a number of ways to modify your resistance exercises to protect your pelvic floor:

- Lighten your weights or resistance so you don't feel downward pressure on your pelvic floor as you move.
- Avoid breath-holding by exhaling with effort (e.g. when you pull, push, lift or lower weights).
- Maintain good posture.
- Reduce the level of your abdominal muscle exercise programs (see *The pelvic floor and core exercises* fact sheet).
- Reduce the depth of your squats and lunges, keeping your hips at a higher level than your knees.
- Choose supported positions (e.g. seated machines or sitting on a fit ball to use hand weights).
- Keep your legs closer together during exercise.
- Lift your pelvic floor before you move and relax after. Notice how many repetitions you can do before your pelvic floor muscles tire. You may need to add some rests or reduce the number of repetitions you do in a row until your pelvic floor muscle fitness improves.

Build your pelvic floor muscle control before progressing to more challenging resistance exercises again. For information on pelvic floor muscle exercises, go to [pelvicfloorfirst.org.au](http://pelvicfloorfirst.org.au)

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## Where to get help

Pelvic floor problems are not a life sentence as they can be treated and in many cases cured. However, not all bladder or bowel control problems are the result of poor pelvic floor muscle fitness. It is important to see a GP or continence professional if you suffer from any of the problems previously described so they can determine the best course of action to get you back in control.

For further information about the pelvic floor or to locate your nearest continence health professional, contact the **National Continence Helpline** on **1800 33 00 66** or go to [continence.org.au](http://continence.org.au).

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Go to [pelvicfloorfirst.org.au](http://pelvicfloorfirst.org.au) for more information on putting your pelvic floor first.

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