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CORE THE RE OF THE MATTER

THERE ARE MANY MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE PELVIC FLOOR. WE KNOW IT EXISTS AND THAT IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE IMPORTANT, BUT WHY? WELLBEING GETS TO THE BOTTOM OF THE PELVIC FLOOR'S FUNCTIONS AND DYSFUNCTIONS, AND HOW THEY MAY AFFECT YOU.

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles and ligaments that support the bowel, bladder, uterus and vagina in women and the prostate in men. It supports the core of the body. Pelvic-floor muscles tightly cover the area between the coccyx and the pubic bone and all the organs in between, much like a protective hammock. The openings of the urethra, vagina and anus are all directly linked to and affected by the strength of pelvic floor.

For example, when the pelvic floor muscles are contracted, the internal organs are lifted and tighten as a result, stopping anything travelling from the bowel or bladder, while relaxing the pelvic floor allows for a release. When these important core muscles are in a weakened state they are unable to do their jobs and the body's normal functions can become an involuntary source of frustration, pain and embarrassment.

STRENGTH AND FLEXIBILITY

A strong pelvic floor is important as it significantly contributes to spinal health through having a strong core and to maintaining bladder and bowel control by forming part of the muscular control system that prevents accidental or involuntary urinary or faecal loss.

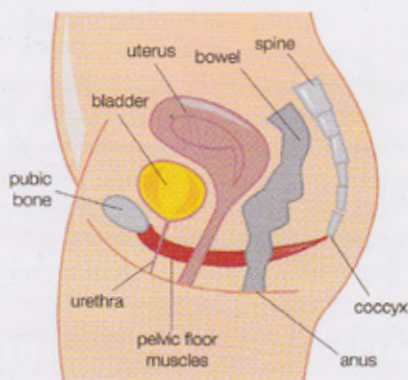
"The pelvic floor is an incredibly influential, central structure in the body and having a strong, functional pelvic floor should be of utmost importance to all of us," affirms Karin Sharp-Gurtner, certified Pilates, Iyengar yoga and Gyrokinesis teacher, wellness personal trainer and structural bodywork therapist (www.art-of-motion.com). When referring to "functional strength", Sharp-Gurtner means strength that can benefit us all in our everyday lives.

"Functional strength encompasses a healthy base for tone and responsiveness in the pelvic floor muscles so they can perform three main functions," says Sharp-Gurtner. "They can resist involuntarily internal pressure, such as sneezing. They should also relax when relaxation is appropriate and needed, for example, when going to the toilet. Finally, the pelvic floor should voluntarily engage if required, for example when performing strong abdominal exercises."

The pelvic floor is often associated with incontinence and is usually regarded as being a primarily "female" issue. This is, however, untrue and just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. A dysfunctional pelvic floor can affect both men and women at all stages of life and in a number of ways. In addition to supporting the pelvic organs, it also supports the balance and alignment of the pelvis and the elongation and decompression of the spine, which in turn assists free leg and arm movement, supports the lower back and contributes to a relaxed neck and shoulders.


"The pelvic floor also has an intimate relationship with the respiratory diaphragm, greatly influencing our breathing and therefore everything else that relates to efficient respiration, such as postural alignment, improved circulation, energy levels, mental clarity and strength, just to name a few," explains Sharp-Gurtner. "The pelvic floor is also a source of physical and mental energy and certainly contributes to a satisfying sex life for both men and women," she adds.

"The pelvic floor is an incredibly influential, central structure in the body and having a strong, functional pelvic floor should be of utmost importance to all of us."



THE PROBLEMS

In a nutshell, a weak pelvic floor means the organs in your pelvic area are vulnerable and unsupported, which can lead to a number →

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white short-sleeved dress with intricate gold and brown embroidery, is captured in a dynamic, joyful pose. She is barefoot, with her arms raised high and one leg extended horizontally to the right. Her head is tilted back, and she has a radiant smile. The setting is a lush green field filled with dandelions, with a dense line of trees in the background under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall mood is one of freedom and happiness.

The pelvic floor is one of those elements in your body you can't directly see or visualise, yet it is very present and important for your happiness and health.

For men with a dysfunctional pelvic floor, relaxing and strengthening muscles can help to promote better health, posture and heightened sexual performance.



of undesirable physical problems. "For both men and women with a weak pelvic floor, any activity that increases intra-abdominal pressure, such as coughing, sneezing, running, jumping and many sporting activities, may lead to stress incontinence of urine or faeces," says Dr Marisa Stevenson MB ChB Dip Obst (www.edgewellness.com.au).

"Research has shown that 30 per cent of Australian women over 45 report some urine leakage during physical activity and that 13 per cent of 18- to 23-year-olds also admit to a similar problem." One of the misconceptions about the pelvic floor, other than that it only affects women, is that it only affects older women or that any problems are side-effects of pregnancy and giving birth.

"The pelvic organs are held in place by fascia and ligaments and are supported from below by pelvic floor muscles," explains Dr Stevenson. "If the fascia and ligaments are torn or stretched for any reason and the pelvic floor muscles are weak, a prolapse of the pelvic organs may occur." A prolapse is when the lower abdominal organs protrude down into the vagina due to a lack of support from the pelvic floor. This can be an uncomfortable source of insecurity for many women and can cause symptoms of physical discomfort and distress.

In addition to the above factors, a weakened pelvic floor may also result in pelvic or abdominal pain and/or painful intercourse, which as Dr Stevenson points out, "can have a significant impact on one's psychosocial wellbeing and intimate relationships".

BEYOND WEAKNESS

Feeble muscles are only one side of the pelvic floor equation. It is also possible for muscles to be too tight, which also creates a number of issues. Mary O'Dwyer, women's health physiotherapist

MEN AND THE PELVIC FLOOR

Correct pelvic floor function for men is vital for the peak performance of essential functions that take place around the pelvic area.

As a rule, a man's pelvis is usually narrower than a woman's and has only two openings, whereas women have three. When combined with the hormones in the male body, men can be prone to excessive tension (hypertension) in their pelvic floor due to stress. Some people hold tension in their neck or shoulders, whereas others may tighten the pelvic floor, resulting in it becoming over-active.

Tension in the pelvic floor can lead to erectile dysfunction and prostate problems, which can then lead to chronic pain, irritation of the nerves and other urinary, bowel and ejaculation problems.

For men with a dysfunctional pelvic floor, relaxing and strengthening muscles can help to promote better health, posture and heightened sexual performance.

(www.holditsister.com), deems there is much more to pelvic floor dysfunction than muscle limitation.

"Weakness is only one dysfunction affecting the pelvic floor muscles. I commonly treat three separate types of pelvic floor muscle problems," she says. "Some women tighten strongly at the waist in order to make it appear smaller or over-train the upper abdominal 'bracing' muscles through exercise. When the waist and chest wall muscles switch on before the pelvic floor muscles, or if the pelvic floor fails to lift and hold early enough, involuntary stress urine loss is likely."

O'Dwyer also explains that women can often fail to relax their pelvic floor muscles due to such factors as stress, abuse issues or prolonged ballistic exercise. "Prolonged over-activity causes stiffness, muscular trigger points and painful intercourse," she says.

Identifying whether an individual's pelvic floor is "weakened" by being either too tight or too slack ultimately determines what treatment should take place, as no two bodies function in the same way. "Women's health physiotherapists, such as myself, identify the muscle issue before prescribing exercises, as strength training for tight pelvic floor muscles would lead to spasm and more pain," says O'Dwyer.

Overactive pelvic floor muscles tend to respond to treatment involving breathing and relaxation therapy, specific muscle stretches and internal muscular releases.

An overactive or "tight" pelvic floor is often common in athletes; their muscles and ligaments in the pelvis become tense and inflexible. "In male athletes I occasionally see bladder urgency and groin hernias associated with lower-back problems. In these men the pelvic floor muscles are often overactive, which leads to bladder and bowel problems," explains O'Dwyer.

Being able to have a strong pelvic floor is as important as having a flexible one that can relax when needed. Control over the body's pelvic muscles is really the key for a healthy and functioning pelvic floor.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Not being able to have the freedom to be intimate with your partner or saying no to exercise with friends can have a definite impact on your social life as well as your mental and emotional health. Pelvic floor dysfunction is not just a physical issue but one that affects many sufferers on a psychological level by →

"The pelvic floor is also a source of physical and mental energy and certainly contributes to a satisfying sex life for both men and women."



Pelvic floor exercises performed during and after pregnancy significantly reduce the incidence and severity of pregnancy-related incontinence.

psychological level by hampering both self-esteem and confidence.

"Pelvic floor problems affect a women's quality of life and how she views her body," says O'Dwyer. "Partners are also affected when these problems cause urine loss or pain during intercourse."

"A functional pelvic floor benefits our whole being as well as our comfort and confidence in our social environments," says Sharp-Gurtner. "Being able to jump around with the kids, cough without worrying about leaking and enjoy more relaxed shoulders and freedom of movement in the whole body should not be underestimated. Having more energy and mental clarity most definitely contributes to happiness and enjoying life in every possible way."

WHAT CAUSES A DYSFUNCTIONAL PELVIC FLOOR?

There are some lifestyle factors that can result in a weakened pelvic floor but there are also events that happen in our lives that cannot be helped where the only option is to deal with them the best way we can.

Obesity puts unnecessary strain on the body and the pelvis can suffer because of this. Smoking can encourage regular coughing fits, which also put a strain on the pelvic floor, as does regular heavy lifting and frequent constipation. There are lifestyle factors that cannot be helped, such as menopause and ageing. It is reassuring, however, to know that the function of the pelvic floor can be helped with a bit of mindfulness and dedication. We may not be able to stop our bodies from ageing, but we *can* give them the best chance at coping with certain experiences by keeping them in top working order.

One of the misconceptions about the pelvic floor, other than that it only affects women, is that it only affects older women or that any problems are side-effects of pregnancy and giving birth.

Pregnancy, childbirth and the pelvic floor

Weak or tight pelvic floor muscles are often associated with, but not limited to, lower-back pain and pelvic-girdle pain during pregnancy. Pregnancy puts a lot of strain on the female pelvis, due to the pressure and weight bearing down. An alteration in hormones and the anatomical changes that occur throughout a pregnancy mean muscle is gradually stretched as the baby grows and then stretched again during labour.

During labour, the muscles of the vagina and perineum may be torn or cut, which in turn affects the pelvic floor as each opening is directly linked to this area. This is why it is crucial to practise and maintain pelvic-floor muscle strength and flexibility before giving birth in addition to restoring muscle function and control after giving birth.

"Many women report urinary incontinence during pregnancy and in the weeks after childbirth and, for many, symptoms may persist for up to a year," explains Dr Stevenson. "An unfortunate few women have persistent incontinence of varying degrees for life."

"A new mother needs to pay attention to her pelvic floor as soon as possible after childbirth with very gentle pelvic-floor exercises based on awareness and breathing," adds Sharp-Gurtner. "For most women, it's about toning their pelvic floor after childbirth to assist continence, an optimal alignment of the pelvis and the spine."

As mentioned, prolapse of the internal organs can also be symptom of a weak pelvic floor, yet regular, gentle prenatal pelvic floor exercises can help prevent this from occurring. "Around 50 per cent of childbearing women have prolapse, yet few know about the condition or how to prevent it from worsening," says O'Dwyer.

Studies continue to reveal that pelvic floor exercises performed during and after pregnancy significantly reduce the incidence and severity of pregnancy-related incontinence. "A pelvic floor exercise program during pregnancy can also have a positive effect on the second stage of labour. However, pelvic floor exercises need to be performed for life to fully protect the pelvic floor," advises Dr Stevenson.

Ageing

During menopause, women usually experience a decrease in oestrogen that can start the thinning, weakening and loss of tone of the pelvic muscles and connective tissues.

"As women age, the pelvic floor muscles may weaken, along with the hormonal changes that occur at menopause; bladder control can be adversely affected," explains Dr Stevenson. "A strong pelvic floor that results from regular exercising helps to lessen the effects of menopause on bladder control. A presurgical pelvic floor strengthening program is advisable for women undergoing hysterectomy as a strong pelvic floor will help to support their internal organs and any stitches after the hysterectomy."

Pelvic weakness tends to affect men more as they age and is commonly associated with prostate enlargement, which causes a slower stream of urine and difficulties in stopping and starting the flow. →

Surgery

The post-operative effects of surgery such as a prostatectomy for men or caesarean or hysterectomy for women can become substantially more difficult to manage if the pelvic floor is unable to support the pelvic organs, much less support post-operation stitches or assist in recovery. For example, post-prostatectomy, many men experience bladder incontinence and erectile dysfunction.

"Urinary incontinence is a troubling symptom that some men experience following prostate surgery," says Dr Stevenson. "Pelvic floor exercises were strongly recommended by the experts attending the International Consultation on Incontinence (July 2008) for all men before and following a prostatectomy. Research has also shown that strengthening the pelvic floor muscles can improve sexual function and overcome urinary incontinence in many men following a radical prostatectomy."

BENEFITS OF A STRONG PELVIC FLOOR

The pelvic floor muscles help to support and protect the bones in the spine, which is particularly important in conditions such as osteoporosis, which causes the bones to become fragile and brittle.

The pelvic floor plays a significant role in sexual intercourse for both men and women. Having a strong pelvic floor can actually increase sexual arousal, improve the level of sensation felt during intercourse and enhance the ability to achieve orgasm.

"According to the UK-based Impotence Association, pelvic floor exercises may increase awareness of sexual sensations and enhance enjoyment in men," says Dr Stevenson. "The exercises work by strengthening the muscles around the penis and by improving blood supply in the pelvis. They also enhance the sensation of orgasm by strengthening the pelvic muscles, which contract during ejaculation."

A number of women have also reported greater orgasmic intensity after a pelvic-floor-strengthening program, as well as reducing the occurrence of painful intercourse.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO HELP YOUR PELVIC FLOOR

Pilates

One of the central aims of Pilates is to strengthen the core and, as a result, the spine and torso. The pelvic floor forms the base of the core. Pilates helps by increasing pelvic-floor awareness, which is one of the most important steps in gaining and maintaining functional pelvic floor strength. The pelvic floor is an essential element in the practice of contemporary Pilates and is an important element in every exercise.

"Because a holistic Pilates lesson incorporates active strengthening, retraining natural reflex action and relaxation, it covers all vital components," says Sharp-Gurtner. "It also gives us the unique ability to incorporate indirect pelvic floor work into physical training by using visualisation and the engagement or relaxation of other body structures such as the toes, the inner thighs, the diaphragm and the muscles of the neck, jaw and face. Believe it



or not, all the abovementioned are connected to the pelvic floor!"

Sharp-Gurtner notes that another advantage of Pilates is its adaptability and pace. The exercises can be modified for individual needs and, as the general pace is slow, participants have time to sense what is happening in their bodies, awareness being an important factor in pelvic floor training.

"I find it a great advantage that in the context of Pilates we treat the pelvic floor as a functional structure which, in conjunction with awareness and smart training, will improve our being as a whole," says Sharp-Gurtner. "We communicate freely and positively and offer tools to make one feel good or even better than they already feel about their body and their pelvic floor."

Sharp-Gurtner believes that when defining pelvic floor function a truly strong pelvic floor is able to engage by reflex, voluntarily engage and be relaxed when necessary. "Simply saying 'Draw your pelvic floor in and up and hold it for 5-10 seconds, then relax it' might work for some people, but what about those with a tight pelvic floor that is already lifted up too high?"

When thinking of strengthening the pelvic floor, Sharp-Gurtner recommends to think of mildly drawing in and up between the left and right sit bones at the bottom of your pelvis, the tailbone and the pubic bone in front of the pelvis. "Use the amount of strength you would use to lift a silk scarf from the middle. The buttocks need to

remain relaxed, as do the eyes, lips and jaw, and the breath should flow naturally," she says.

"It's really important to be consistent with this training and, thankfully, it's also pretty easy! You can practise by attending movement classes or simply practise at home while doing the dishes or even when waiting for the bus. Once you've got the hang of it, you can do pelvic floor training any time, anywhere and for free; it's too easy and painless to avoid!"

Yoga

As with Pilates, yoga also offers an all-important mind-body connection through a series of core-strength postures specific to the pelvic floor. There are many different types of yoga that are all beneficial for the mind, body and spirit, but certain poses are especially beneficial for the pelvic floor, such as the mula bandha. Mula bandha is often described as an internal lift that involves drawing the pelvic floor in and up and is often used in yoga for menopause as a way of helping the body to transition.

Mula means "root," while *bandha* means "lock", which makes sense when we think of the pelvic floor residing at our base or root chakra, also known as the body's energy centre.

Nutrition

A healthy, balanced diet is a great way to start a pelvic floor program off on the right track. As over-straining the bowels and frequent constipation can affect the pelvic floor, a diet rich in high-fibre foods is important. Foods with insoluble fibre, such as wholewheat and wholegrain foods, nuts and vegetables, help to promote the movement through your digestive system and healthy stools. Soluble fibre dissolves in water and forms a gel-like substance; it's found in oats, beans, apples, citrus fruits, carrots, barley and psyllium husk. →

Foods with insoluble fibre, such as wholewheat and wholegrain foods, nuts and vegetables, help to promote the movement through your digestive system.

A diet rich in high-fibre foods is important.



SIMPLE EXERCISES TO DO AT HOME

Karin Sharp-Gurtner, an experienced Pilates and yoga instructor and structural bodywork therapist, shows you how to strengthen your pelvic floor in the comfort of your own home.

It's important to note that if you are in doubt about the state of your pelvic floor or you have been unsuccessful at strengthening it in the past, seek a specialised health professional or perhaps try a class that specialises in working on the pelvic floor.

"Before going into a class, I recommend talking to the school or instructor about your interest in pelvic floor and finding out whether their style is suitable for you," advises Sharp-Gurtner. "If they don't address your query properly, I suggest you keep looking; your body is your temple and worth being treated like one!"

Relaxation and awareness

Start your pelvic-floor practice with relaxation and awareness (a relaxed muscle is much easier to strengthen; a tight muscle might just get tighter).



Position

Reverse Rest or Child Pose, with the knees apart, is an ideal position because the pelvic floor is open and relaxed and isn't working against gravity. If this is unsuitable for you, lie on your back with your knees bent and touching, your feet apart on the floor.



Visualisation

Start by bringing your awareness to the pelvic floor, which is the hammock-like sling of muscles in the lower pelvis. For easy visualizing, imagine your pelvic floor to be a set of elastic bands. One band connects the tailbone to the pubic bone at the front of your pelvis. One band connects your two sit bones. Let the elastic bands be soft, let your sit bones move apart and let your tailbone lengthen down towards the floor without effort.

Points to watch

Let your breath flow freely and allow your abdominals and buttocks to relax so the sit bones open.

Hip release

Starting position

Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet parallel and hip distance apart on the floor. Ensure the pelvis is in a neutral position

where your pubic bone and the tips of your hip bones (the pointy, boney bits on the right and left side of your pelvis) are on the same level, horizontal to the floor.

If you feel tension in your lower back you can place a pillow underneath your head or bring your feet closer to your buttocks.

Visualisation

Bring your awareness to your pelvis and imagine your two sit bones to be connected with an elastic band.



Exercise I

Inhale Open the knees slowly and feel the imaginary elastic band stretch as the knees lower. The pelvic floor relaxes slowly.

Exhale Engage the pelvic floor by visualising the elastic band tightening and your sit bones moving closer together. Lift the knees slowly as you contract the pelvic floor.

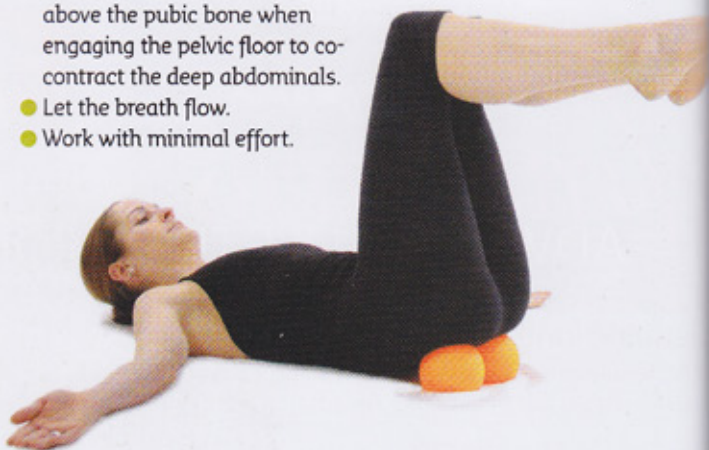


Exercise II

Repeat the same exercise with one leg at a time, keeping the other leg stable.

Points to watch

- Keep the pelvis stable and anchored to the floor.
- Ensure your abdominals don't "dome"; if they do, draw back from above the pubic bone when engaging the pelvic floor to co-contract the deep abdominals.
- Let the breath flow.
- Work with minimal effort.



Triangles

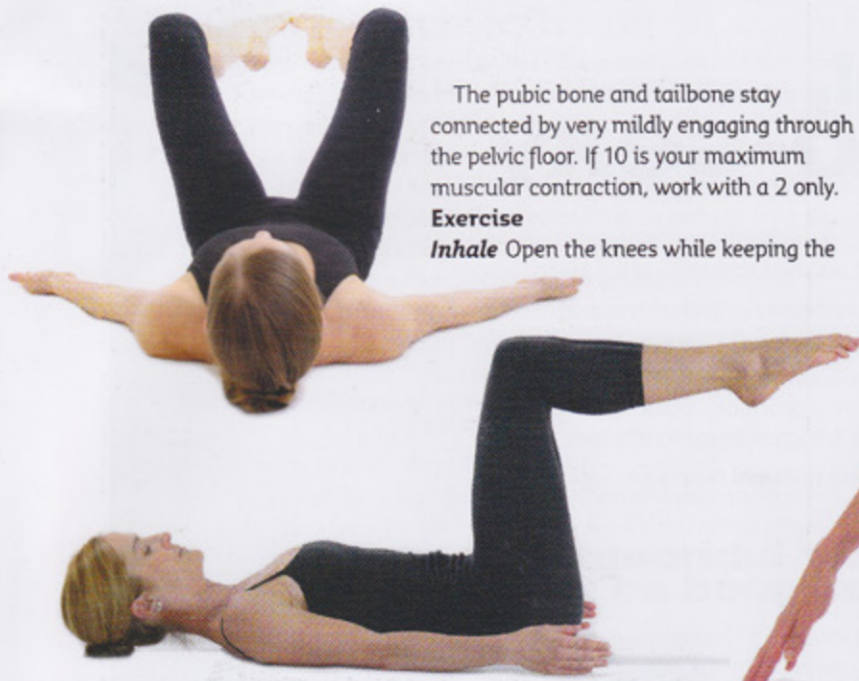
Starting position

Lie on your back with two soft balls or a rolled towel underneath your pelvis. The lower back should be relaxed and in a soft arch (towards the floor) so the pelvis is slightly inverted. The legs are lifted and close together (as much as possible) with the knees bent and the lower legs fairly parallel to the floor. The knees can be above the hips or above the belly button.

If you feel tension in your lower back, move the rolled towel a little closer to your sit bones and let the lower back sink more towards the floor.

Visualisation

Visualise your sit bones to be connected with one elastic band and your tailbone and pubic bone with a second one.



The pubic bone and tailbone stay connected by very mildly engaging through the pelvic floor. If 10 is your maximum muscular contraction, work with a 2 only.

Exercise

Inhale Open the knees while keeping the

feet together. Imagine the elastic band between your sit bones stretching and the bones opening in front. Allow your pelvic floor to soften.

Exhale Draw in and up from your pelvic floor to close the knees. Imagine the elastic band tightening and the sit bones moving closer together in front.

Points to watch

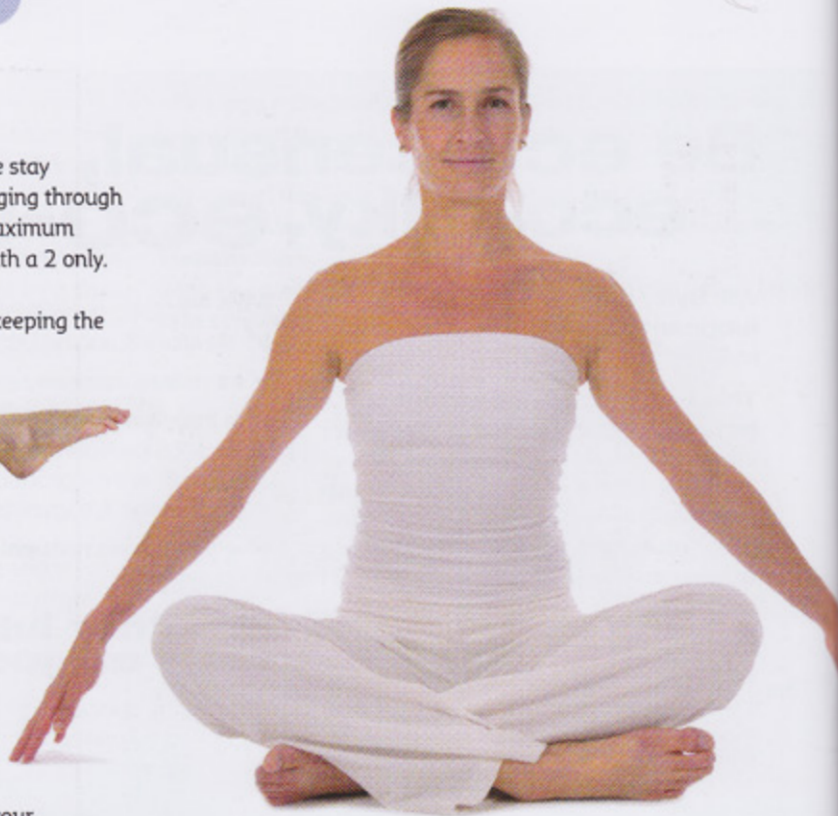
- Keep the pelvis inverted and the lower back soft.
- Let the breath flow.
- Work with minimal effort.

In the context of Pilates, we treat the pelvic floor as a functional structure which, in conjunction with awareness and smart training, will improve our being as a whole.

TIPS FOR A HEALTHY PELVIC FLOOR

Simple strengthening tips from women's health physiotherapist, Mary O'Dwyer:

- Adopt a tall posture when you sit, stand and walk to automatically switch on the pelvic floor and core muscles. Relax abdominal tension and open the base of your ribs and abdomen as you breathe in.
- Learn to identify the subtle lifting action of the pelvic floor muscles from underneath the body, as you breathe out, without strong abdominal muscles doing the action.
- Focus on exercise with movement, such as bellydancing or walking, with less emphasis on isolating trunk exercises, such as sit-ups.
- Exercise that connects the mind and body, such as yoga or tai chi, improves awareness and control of pelvic floor muscles.
- Build in exercise break times to allow pelvic floor muscle relaxation.
- Avoid one-off or repeated heavy lifting, which can strain the pelvic floor and possibly cause prolapse.
- Eat fibre-rich foods and drink lots of fluids to prevent bowel straining.
- Lift the pelvic floor before coughing and sit down if you are experiencing prolonged coughing, such as when suffering from a chest infection.
- See also www.pelvicfloorfirst.com.au



Squeezing a sponge

Starting position

Sit in an upright position. A tailor's seat is ideal because it will assist relaxation of the deep and superficial muscles of your bottom, but if this is uncomfortable you can sit in any way you like.

In whatever way you sit, ensure you are sitting on top of the sit bones, maybe even slightly in front, and that your spine is long and your shoulders open and as relaxed as possible.

Visualisation

Visualise your pelvic floor as a sponge between the sit bones, the tailbone and the pubic bone.

Exercise

Exhale Draw in and up from your pelvic floor and imagine your sit bones, tailbone and pubic bone are mildly squeezing the sponge.

Inhale Relax your pelvic floor completely and let the sponge expand. You can maintain the lift/squeeze for a few breaths in between to build up endurance strength.

Points to watch

- Stay seated on your sit bones.
- Let the breath flow.
- Keep your buttocks relaxed.
- Work with minimal effort (remember how much it takes to squeeze a sponge).
- When releasing, let the pelvic floor relax completely.

As with many of your body functions, care and prevention really are the keys to maintaining a healthy, sustainable and enjoyable lifestyle in both the short and long terms. The pelvic floor is one of those elements in your body you can't directly see or visualise, yet it is very present and important for your happiness and health.

You may not be able to see the pelvic floor getting more toned and flexible, but you will undoubtedly be able to *feel* the results of engaging it. Above all, the pelvic floor is an element of your body that is crucial to your health yet one that often goes ignored until the body refuses to act in the way it has before. As the old saying goes, prevention is the best cure and this is as true of pelvic floor fitness as it is of anything. ☺

Kate McKee enjoys writing for a variety of publications on topics ranging from beauty to interior design and the more esoteric, such as the mystery of ghosts or corporate feng shui. Passionate about natural health and lifestyle, Kate loves to share her interests and discoveries.