

FLINT

Kegel Exercises

The Kegel exercises (pronounced kee' gull) are designed to restore or improve muscle tone and increase your control over the pelvic floor muscles.

The muscles of the pelvic floor can be pictured as a sling that attaches to the pubic bone in front and the tailbone in back. Part of this group of muscles, the sphincter, forms a figure eight around the urethra and vagina in front and the anus toward the back. See illustration. Voluntary control of the pelvic floor can be achieved by exercise.

Kegel exercises reduce or eliminate problems which could otherwise result from stretching during childbirth and the aging process. These problems include prolapsed (sagging) uterus, a prolapsed bladder, and possible urinary stress incontinence (an uncontrolled leaking of urine with sudden movement, like coughing or sneezing).

By contracting the muscles of the pelvic floor, you are shortening the muscle fibers that have been stretched, thus aiding their restoration.

An added bonus which you will receive with the continued practice of Kegels is an increased sensitivity in the vagina during sexual intercourse. With improved muscle tone, the vagina becomes more snug, and the response from the nerve endings beneath the vaginal walls is improved. The benefits, then, of Kegel exercises are not limited to the period of birth, but extend throughout your life.

Your first step in exercising the pelvic floor is to locate the muscles. To do this, contract the muscles around the urethra as if you are trying to hold back the flow of urine. Then, try urinating when your bladder is not full, stopping and starting the flow of urine several times. Progressively allow a smaller amount of urine to escape each time. Be aware that stopping the flow tightens the pelvic floor while releasing the flow relaxes the pelvic floor.

Another way of checking for pelvic floor tension and relaxation is to tighten the muscles of the vagina around the penis during sexual intercourse. Your partner can give you feedback on the effectiveness of this exercise.

Once you achieve awareness of the pelvic floor muscles, you should discontinue practice during urination. Now contract and release pelvic floor muscles quickly and firmly, starting with ten per session, five times a day, increasing to ten sessions per day. Hint: Use an everyday activity such as washing dishes or stopping at red lights to remind yourself to do a series of Kegels.

The elevator exercise is done by imagining the pelvic floor as an elevator. Contract the muscles upward, from the first floor to the fifth floor, stopping at each floor and getting tighter as you go higher. Then, release downward, releasing tension (letting people off) at each floor, from the fifth to the first.

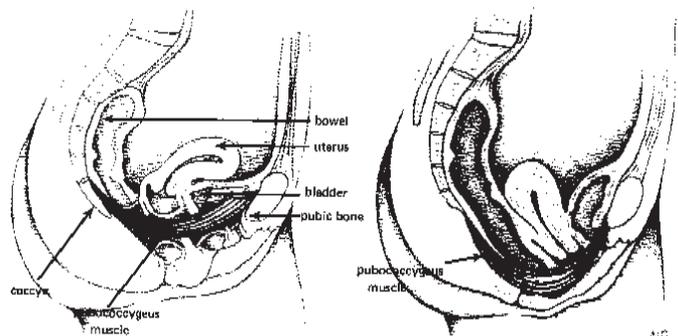
The next step in learning control over the pelvic floor muscles is to release them completely to a basement level by giving them a slight push. This is the degree of relaxation you need to achieve while pushing a baby down the birth canal. Practice this with your bladder empty. Always return to the second level to maintain a constant degree of tension, just as a hammock returns to a higher position when you get up.

The final Kegel exercise is designed to develop elasticity of the pelvic floor muscles. Sit on a low stool or chair with your knees apart. Lean forward and rest your elbows on your knees. Begin by tensing the muscles around the urethra, then the vagina and backward to the rectum in a wavelike pattern. Release in the opposite direction.

All of these exercises should be done for the rest of your life to maintain optimum muscular condition of the pelvic floor.

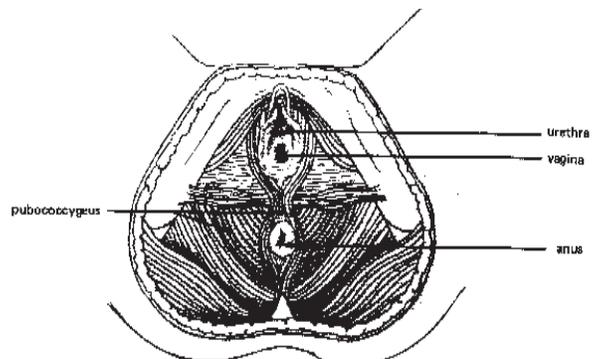
Daily Practice Session

1. Firmly and quickly contract and release pelvic floor muscles 10 times a session, 5-10 times daily.
2. Elevator exercise: Work up to 10th floor. Do slowly, 5 times a session, at least 3 times a day.
3. Add basement level to elevator.
4. Tense from front to back, then release back to



Good muscle tone.

Poor muscle tone.



Pelvic floor muscles (cross section).