

Pregnancy Pelvic Floor

Why strengthen the pelvic floor?

All women need the pelvic floor muscles to be strong, especially during pregnancy and thereafter. These muscles stretch to allow the baby to pass through and then should contract back to normal post-birth. If women practice pelvic floor exercises during and after their pregnancy they are likely to make a quicker recovery post childbirth. A weak pelvic floor can cause incontinence, which if left untreated, could cause further issues later in life. It is important to not just accept leaking as something that comes with childbirth, but instead to work on the causes of it. A stronger pelvic floor will also make your core generally stronger, help you lift heavier weights, reduce the risk of prolapse and improve sexual sensation.

Importantly, we don't want our pelvic floor to be over active as this is also dysfunctional, so make sure you not only activate, but also work on the relaxation of these muscles.

Structure of Pelvic Floor Muscles

The pelvic floor muscles form a muscular floor to the pelvis and support abdominal organs as well as the growing foetus. A weaker pelvic floor can cause incontinence of urine and faeces and is therefore an essential muscle group to focus on during pregnancy and postpartum.

The pelvic floor muscles have two layers of muscle, the superficial layer (perineal muscle) and the deep layer (levator ani muscle). The pelvic floor muscles are made up of both slow twitch and fast twitch fibres, meaning they can respond to both needs of sustained endurance and a sudden rise in pressure. To train both the slow and fast twitch muscles we should be exercising the pelvic floor in both a slow controlled way, and faster sharper contractions and release.

Pelvic Floor Exercises

Please watch the Mamawell Pregnancy Programme Pelvic Floor video.

Get in a comfortable position, either:

- Lying
- Seated with a straight spine
- Standing (work up to this but this position is the most functional as we need our pelvic floor to be strongest in all our moves we do whilst standing).

Take a few deep cleansing breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Then, inhale deeply and as you exhale, imagine drawing up through your back passage and holding there. Don't tighten your buttocks or tense any part of your body.

Let the pelvic floor relax gently and then inhale to start the process again. After a few cycles, start incorporating the front section of your pelvic floor, the contraction is a bit like when you try and stop yourself urinating or holding in wind.

These moves can be done in two ways:

- Slowly: as described above. Hold the contraction for a slow count of 5, then release. Build up to around 10 at this speed.
- Quickly: At the end of the inhale, contract (pull up) your front and/or back passages and then pulse them for a count of 10. Relax, then repeat another 5 times.

Don't forget to breathe deeply at the start and end of these contractions. Work on your pelvic floor as often as you can, maybe doing these exercises morning and bedtime if possible.

A breakdown of all this information is available on the Mamawell Pregnancy programme Pelvic Floor video on the homepage.

