

## The Pelvic Floor



### 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.

### 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. So many reasons to do those exercises daily

# Pelvic floor exercises

Please watch the Mamawell Pelvic Floor video found on your programme page.

Get in a comfortable position, either:

- Lying on your back with your legs bent
- Seated with a straight spine
- Standing (work up to this - but it's the most functional because we need our pelvic floor to activate the most when we're in a standing position)

Take a few deep clearing breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Then, inhale deeply and at the end of the 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 immediately 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. Do 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 break down of all this information is available on the Mamawell postnatal programme pelvic floor video.

## Things to avoid

If you have pelvic floor dysfunction (i.e it is weak, or perhaps even overly contracted) then you need to be mindful about high intensity exercise. Running and high intensity cardio/jumping should not be started until you have worked to strengthen your pelvic floor.

When exercising you should always be mindful of any pressure in the pelvis or leaking and stop what you're doing if either of those are present. Change the exercise, reduce the intensity or weight and keep doing your pelvic floor exercises at other times of day.

## Running

Running needs to be approached mindfully and built up slowly. New guidelines indicate that it's not advised to start running before 12 weeks postpartum, but you can start with lots of low impact cardio before then if you want, in preparation.

A beneficial way to start running again would be to walk briskly for 3 minutes, then run for 3 minutes observing how your body feels. Then repeat, up to as long as you wish.

Before you head out for a run try doing 10 sets of pelvic floor engagements to 'turn it on' before exercising, but be aware of contracting your pelvic floor whilst you are running - keep it neutral.

Remember, you shouldn't accept leaking, it is a sign that you need to work to strengthen yourself from the inside, so work again on your pelvic floor exercises for a few weeks before trying again.