

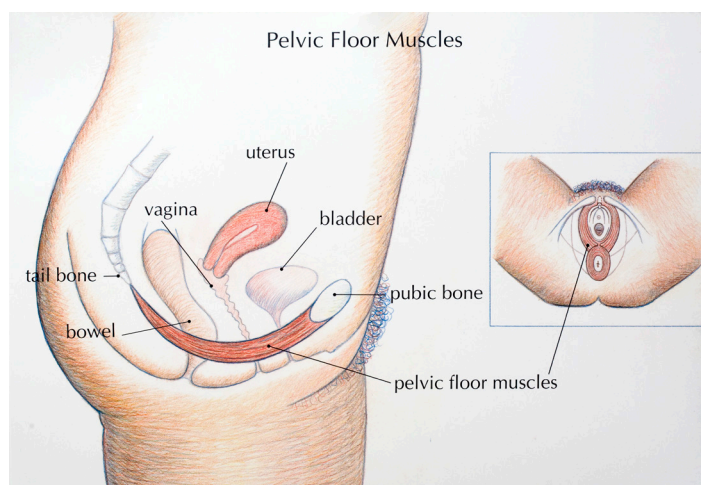
## Fact Sheet

# The Pelvic Floor



### What is the pelvic floor?

'The pelvic floor' refers to a group of muscles in the pelvis which support the bladder, bowel and uterus. These muscles are important in helping bladder and bowel control, and also play a role in sexual function. Pelvic floor muscles can become weakened through pregnancy and childbirth, constipation, heavy lifting, and being overweight. If these muscles become weakened, this can lead to problems with urinary and faecal incontinence, and prolapse of the pelvic organs (where the bladder, uterus or bowel sag into the vagina).



### Urinary incontinence

Urinary incontinence refers to the involuntary leakage of urine. It is a common problem, with nearly 4.8 million Australians over the age of 15 affected - a quarter of the population. It is a problem which affects women and men, but is more common in women. Eighty per cent of people with incontinence who are living in the community are women.<sup>1</sup>

There are several different types of urinary incontinence, but the three most common are

1. stress incontinence
2. urge incontinence and
3. mixed incontinence (a combination of the first two)

Features of stress incontinence are involuntary loss of urine after activities such as laughing, coughing, sneezing, lifting, or jumping. Urge incontinence is the loss of urine accompanied by a sudden and strong desire to pass urine.

If you are experiencing any degree of incontinence (from small accidental leaks to complete loss of control of your bladder), it is a good idea to seek help from a GP or Family Planning clinic. The doctor will talk to you about your symptoms, and arrange some further tests, such as a urine sample and perhaps an ultrasound. They may also ask you to keep a bladder diary, which records how much urine you pass and how often, and whether you had any leakage episodes. An example of a bladder diary can be found on the Continence Foundation of Australia website at: <http://www.continence.org.au/resources.php/01tA0000001b1c2IAA/bladder-diary>

### Management of urinary incontinence

This differs depending on the type of incontinence. However, all types of incontinence can generally be improved by pelvic floor muscle training. Some links to websites which explain how to do pelvic floor exercises are given below. However it can often be beneficial to see a pelvic floor physiotherapist or nurse continence advisor to ensure you are performing the exercises correctly.

<https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/a-healthy-pregnancy/the-pelvic-floor/>

<http://www.continence.org.au/pages/pelvic-floor-women.html>

<http://www.bladderbowel.gov.au/assets/doc/brochures/06PelvicFloorWomen.html>

### Pelvic organ prolapse

This is where the pelvic organs (eg the bladder, bowel or uterus) sag into the vagina. You might feel this as a bulge or a heavy/dragging sensation in your vagina. Other symptoms can be pelvic pain, difficulty emptying your bladder or bowel, and pain or difficulty having sex. Prolapse is very common, and is thought to occur in about 50% of women who have had a baby. However it often doesn't cause

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any symptoms. Pregnancy and childbirth are strong risk factors for the development of pelvic organ prolapse, but other causes can be increasing age, menopause, chronic constipation, heavy lifting and chronic cough.

If you think you have a pelvic organ prolapse and it is causing you symptoms, it is a good idea to see your GP or a Family Planning clinic. The doctor can examine you and discuss options for management with you. These might include weight loss, avoiding constipation, and seeing a pelvic floor physiotherapist for advice about pelvic floor exercises. Other management options are wearing a pessary (a plastic or rubber device that is worn inside the vagina to give internal support to the pelvic organs) or having surgery.

### For more information

- Contact the Family Planning Talkline on 1300 658 886 or go to [www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline)
- Visit your local Family Planning clinic or local GP
- Continence Foundation of Australia: [www.continence.org.au](http://www.continence.org.au)
- National Continence Helpline 1800 330066

### References

1. Continence Foundation of Australia. Incontinence factsheet. Available at: [http://www.continence.org.au/data/files/Access\\_economics\\_report/dae\\_summary\\_final\\_web\\_version.pdf](http://www.continence.org.au/data/files/Access_economics_report/dae_summary_final_web_version.pdf). Accessed on 20 May 2014.

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