

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
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Pelvic Floor Muscle Training for Urinary Incontinence

A simple guide to improving bladder health
and reducing leaks

A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a white t-shirt and dark leggings, is performing a yoga pose on a dark mat. She is in a side plank position, with her left arm extended upwards and her right arm resting on the floor. She is looking up at her hand. The background shows a living room with a large woven basket, a potted plant, and a lamp.

Effective
treatments to
help you regain
control.

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Pelvic Floor Muscle Training

What is Urinary Incontinence?

Urinary incontinence (UI) is a term used to describe a range of bladder issues, including urgency with or without leaking as well as the involuntary loss of urine. It's a remarkably common condition – some studies suggest that as many as half of all women will experience it – and despite what you may have heard, it's not a normal part of getting older.

Common Causes of UI in Women

- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Menopause
- Aging
- Obesity
- Chronic coughing

Fortunately, today's treatments are more effective than ever, and a great place to start is with Pelvic Floor Muscle Training (PFMT).

What is the Pelvic Floor?

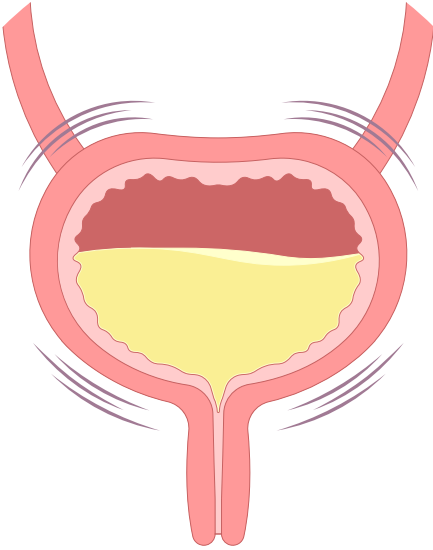
Your pelvic floor is a complex of muscles that support your bladder and other organs. Think of it like a hammock that keeps everything down there in proper position – when those muscles function properly, they play a central role in bladder and bowel control, core stability and sexual health. And when they don't work as they're supposed to, you can find it much more difficult to control when, where and how you go to the bathroom.



What is Pelvic Floor Muscle Training (PFMT)?

Since these are muscles we're talking about, it shouldn't come as a surprise that they can weaken over time or with neglect or through injury. And just like other muscles that you work out, pelvic floor muscles can be strengthened through exercise – and you don't need a gym membership or fancy equipment to see real results!

In fact, that's all that Pelvic Floor Muscle Training is – range of easy-to-do exercises that have been developed specifically to help you strengthen your pelvic floor. Millions of women have found that PFMT can safely and simply deliver significantly improved bladder control.



The Benefits of PFMT

Following a regular program of Pelvic Floor Muscle Training can help you:

- Manage those sudden, uncontrollable urges to go
- Hold in urine more effectively
- Reduce accidental leaks when sneezing, lifting, laughing, coughing or exercising
- Feel more in control of your body
- Improve your sexual health
- Enhance your core stability and posture

The bottom line is, research shows that women practicing PFMT experience significantly fewer leaks – and when they do leak, they produce a smaller volume of urine than those who don't exercise.*

Real Results

- PMFT alone can result in 7 fewer leakage episodes per week compared to usual care.*
- Some studies have found that the cure rate for treatment with PFMT as high as 58% compared to 10% for usual care.*
- 83% of participants of one study said that their quality of life improved from treatment with PFMT.*



*ECRI Institute-Penn Medicine Evidence-based Practice Center. PCORI Evidence Map: Pelvic Floor Muscle Training for Urinary Incontinence in Women. Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute; April 2020. Prepared by ECRI Institute under PCORI Contract No. IDIQ-TO#10-ECRI-SCI-EVIDENCEMAP. www.pcori.org/evidence-maps-UI-PFMT.

How To Do Pelvic Floor Muscle Training Exercises

There are a number of ways to strengthen your pelvic floor, and the approach you choose can make a real difference in the results you see. That's why it's so important to consider all the options available and be open to trying others if you find that one isn't quite the fit you expected it to be.

Supervised vs. Self-Guided PFMT

Supervised PFMT: This is where you work directly with a pelvic floor physical therapist or healthcare provider on your exercises. It's a great starting point because you have the benefit of an expert to ensure that you're doing things correctly and that you're keeping up with a consistent program. Many patients find that a few sessions is all they need, after which they continue on their own, while others like the ongoing support that regular sessions provide.

Self-Guided PFMT: If you're thinking about trying PFMT on your own, keep in mind that supervised PFMT has been shown to be more effective than doing PFMT without professional support. Since that's not always an option, the next best choice is self-guided PFMT. Many women successfully practice pelvic floor muscle exercises with the help of online resources, apps and printed guides. Like any exercise program, consistency and proper form are crucial for success, so if you choose to go this route, make sure you're disciplined enough to stick to it.

Using Biofeedback for PFMT

- Biofeedback therapy can help you learn how to contract and relax your pelvic floor muscles correctly. It's usually performed in a doctor's office with specialized equipment.
- Sensors will be placed inside the vagina or on the skin nearby to help you detect muscle activity. These sensors provide visual or audio feedback as you contract your muscles, and that feedback helps you recognize when you're engaging the right ones.
- This can be a particularly good option if you've been struggling to identify the specific muscles to use or aren't confident that you've been doing things properly.



Adding Other Exercises

Pelvic floor strength improves when combined with other forms of movement and conditioning.

- **Core exercises:** Strengthening abdominal and lower back muscles can enhance pelvic floor stability.
- **Yoga & Pilates:** Certain poses can activate the pelvic floor and improve muscle coordination.
- **Aerobic activity:** Regular physical movement like walking or swimming supports overall pelvic health.



How to Perform a Basic Kegel

The most well-known of all pelvic floor exercises is the Kegel, but it's also one of the most misunderstood. Perhaps you've heard that Kegels are difficult to do, or that it's hard to identify the right muscles. Don't let those rumors get in your way – the truth is, most people find Kegels easy to do, and you can even start right now, while you're reading this!

1. Find the right muscles:

The muscles you're targeting are the same ones you would contract if you were trying to stop the flow of urine midstream.

2. Contract and hold:

Squeeze these muscles and hold that squeeze for 3–5 seconds.

3. Relax:

Slowly release the muscles for 3–5 seconds.

4. Repeat:

Perform 10 repetitions three times a day.

5. Progress:

As your muscles strengthen, try holding each contraction for 10 seconds and increasing the number of repetitions.

*Most women
notice improvement
within 6 to 12
weeks*



How long before you see results?

Most women notice improvement within 6 to 12 weeks, but don't get discouraged if results don't come as fast for you as you'd like. After all, each of us is different, and consistency is key when it comes to exercise.

And if it so happens that you're one of the lucky people who see fast results? Congratulations – but don't let that success fool you into letting your exercise routine slide. Keep up with your Kegels to keep your bladder in great shape.

Important Considerations

Like any other medical treatment, your results may vary. Not all women will experience the same level of improvement with PFMT, and it's more likely to be effective for:

- Younger women and those with stress incontinence (leaks when coughing, sneezing, or exercising)
- Women who practice PFMT regularly. Remember: Consistency, consistency, consistency!
- Those who combine PFMT with lifestyle changes like weight management and bladder training.

Ultimately, PFMT will deliver the best results when it's part of a broader treatment plan – there can be many factors that contribute to incontinence, and effective care path is one that addresses as many of these as possible. Consult your healthcare provider today to create a plan that's personalized just for you.

Studies suggest that PFMT can result in about 7 fewer leakage episodes per week compared to usual care.



Additional Resources

Learn More About PFMT & Pelvic Floor Health from the National Association for Continence:

- Download pelvic floor exercises: <https://nafc.org/pelvic-floor-health-center>
- Watch a step-by-step Kegel video: <https://nafc.org/kegels>
- Learn about biofeedback training: <https://NAFC.org/biofeedback>

Research Links

Interested in learning more about the research and findings on the benefits of pelvic floor muscle training? The Patient Centered Outcomes Research Institute has prepared a summary document that you can download here:

<https://www.pcori.org/sites/default/files/PCORI-Pelvic-Floor-Muscle-Training-UI-Evidence-Maps-Summary-Report.pdf>

You can also find an interactive visualization of the data here:

<https://www.pcori.org/implementation-evidence/evidence-synthesis-reports-and-interactive-visualizations/evidence-maps-and-visualizations/effect-pelvic-floor-muscle-training-urinary-incontinence>

Note – the information found at these links can be technical, so it's best to discuss any questions you may have with your doctor.



Your Action Plan

Find a specialist: Look for a pelvic health professional with the free NAFC Doctor Finder.

Talk to your doctor: Reach out and ask if PFMT is right for you.

Be patient & consistent: PFMT takes time, but it works!

Remember, you're not alone!

Millions of women experience urinary incontinence, and effective treatments are available to help you regain control.

How Does PFMT Help with Urinary Incontinence?

*Stronger pelvic
floor muscles
mean better
bladder
function!*



WE'RE HERE TO HELP

For more information about Biofeedback, visit the National Association for Continence online at www.NAFC.org/biofeedback. To learn more about Pelvic Floor Training, visit www.NAFC.org.

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