

Your Guide To Kegel Exercises

Improve Your Pelvic
Floor Function



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION



FOR CONTINENCE



If you're looking to improve your pelvic floor function – strengthen your muscles, get better control of your bladder and reduce urgency and leakage – you've probably been told that you should start doing Kegel exercises. So why isn't everybody doing them?

Unfortunately, Kegel exercises are a lot like calculus problems: Everybody's heard of them, most people are afraid of them, and few people understand them. But the truth is, a Kegel is a lot more like basic addition: So easy that pretty much anybody can do it. We'll show you how...

WHAT IS A KEGEL?

Know how training can strengthen your arms, build up your legs and give you great abs? The same is true for many of the muscles you don't see, including those that are essential for good pelvic floor function. That's why gynecologist Arnold Kegel invented his namesake exercises back in 1948, as a way for women to bring tone back to an often-neglected part of their anatomy.

*We have some
very good
news for you*



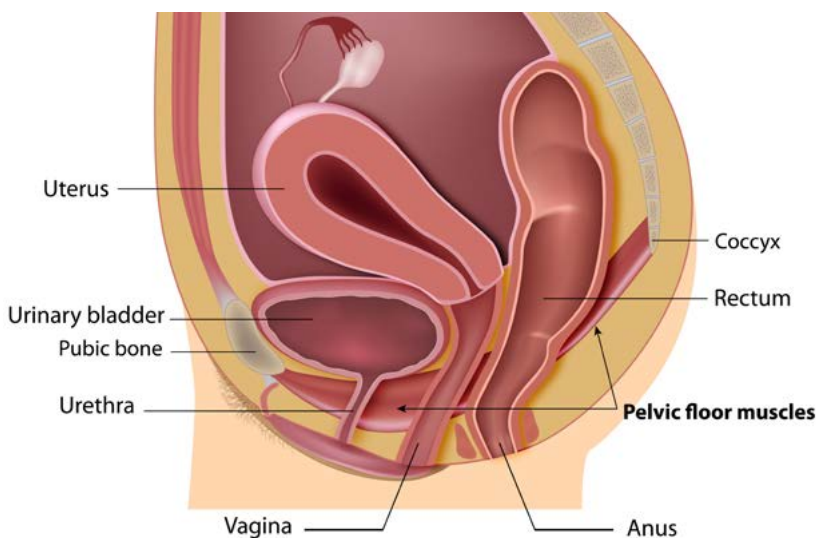
In the decades since, Kegels have become a first-line treatment for many bladder conditions, including stress urinary incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse and more. The idea is that by strengthening your pelvic floor muscles, you'll be better able to manage your urges and hold in urine more effectively.

Your Guide To Kegel Exercises

HOW DO KEGELS WORK?

You can visualize the pelvic floor as a web or a basket of muscles that supports the pelvic organs, including the bladder, the rectum, and the uterus. These are the organs that are responsible for proper bladder, bowel and sexual function, as well as the passing of waste.

Strengthening these muscles so that they can properly contract and relax can help you control symptoms of incontinence or prolapse. You accomplish this by repeatedly tensing and releasing them, much like you do with any other muscle group you work out. Over time, their conditioning improves, and that can get you back to a more normal state.



ARE KEGELS RIGHT FOR ME?

With the way that Kegels are often presented, you couldn't be blamed for thinking that they're great for just about anybody. In fact, there are some people who should avoid them. Certain bladder conditions are not the result of having weak pelvic floor muscles but from having muscles that are too active. In those cases, performing Kegel exercises would be counterproductive, because all you'd be doing is making muscles that are already tense even tenser. Make sure to check with your doctor or physical therapist before beginning a Kegel exercise program (or any exercise program, really).

HOW TO DO A KEGEL

Before you're able to properly perform a Kegel, the first thing you'll need to know is which muscles to target. Even though you can't see these muscles, it's not difficult to do.

Find a comfortable place to lie down, or sit in a relaxed, upright position. Begin by focusing on the perineal area – that's the area between the genitals and anus. Now, slowly contract the muscles that you would tighten if you were trying to stop the flow of urine or prevent yourself from passing gas. When you can do this without squeezing your buttocks, abdomen or inner thighs, you've correctly identified your pelvic floor muscles. Hold the contraction for a moment, then relax your muscles by letting them return to their rest position and they feel soft again. Voila – you've done a Kegel!

Once you've identified your pelvic floor muscles, practice contracting them (while trying to avoid tightening other muscle groups as you do) and then relaxing them to become more familiar with how this feels. As you become more aware of the muscles and better coordinated with these exercises, you may experience a lifting-up sensation along with the squeeze-in feeling of the contraction. This means you're gaining more motion in these muscles, which will help with their overall strength and endurance.

Contracting the muscles helps to strengthen them and, in return, improves the support of your sphincters, bladder and other pelvic organs – but remember to let your muscles relax fully after each contraction, too. The complete process of squeezing and releasing is the correct way to perform a Kegel, and you'll get more benefit from performing them this way.

What if I'm having trouble?

If you find that you can't seem to locate your pelvic floor muscles or isolate them properly, don't give up! Here are a few tips that may help:

- **Let go of tension.** Take several slow, deep breaths in and out through your nose and mouth and try to let go of any tension you feel in your pelvic floor, including your thighs and butt.
- **Make sure to fully relax your pelvic floor after each squeeze.** Sometimes, especially if you have a weakened or compromised pelvic floor, the "release" part of the Kegel is very subtle or happens before you can sense it. The more you practice, the more this should improve. Eventually, you'll reach the point where you can feel both the contraction and relaxation.
- **Change position.** Reorienting your body can sometimes help you get a better sensation of the squeeze. Try lying on your side, sitting upright, or face-down on your stomach.
- **Don't forget to breathe!** Make sure you're not holding your breath while performing a Kegel. Normal, relaxed breathing is what you should be going for.
- **Consult a PT.** A great way to develop good technique is through the assistance of a pelvic floor physical therapist. They're specialists at helping women work through many of the physiological issues impacting their bladder function, sort of like personal trainers for the pelvic floor.

DEVELOPING A ROUTINE

Now that you've mastered the Kegel, it's time to put things into practice. There are a couple of types of Kegel exercises you can do, and this variety can help work your muscles in different ways. Try using these exercises in combination with one another to get the greatest benefit:

Quick Flick or Short Muscle Contractions – The first exercise is called a quick or short contraction. It works the muscle fibers that respond quickly to compress the urethra and shut off the flow of urine to prevent leakage.

>> To perform these contractions, quickly tighten your pelvic floor muscles, lift them up, hold the contraction for 1-2 seconds, and then release the muscles back down. You should continue to breathe normally as you do.

Long-Hold Muscle Contractions – This exercise works on the supportive strength and endurance of the muscle fibers and is referred to as a long-hold contraction.

>> To perform these contractions, the same muscles you used with the quick contractions are now going to be gradually tightened, lifted and held for several seconds. At first, it may be difficult to hold the contraction for more than 1 or 2 seconds. Ultimately, the goal is to hold the contraction for 10 seconds then rest for 10 seconds to allow enough time for the muscle to recover.

Start with a goal of holding for up to 5 seconds, and when that becomes easy, try working your way up to 10 seconds. Don't worry if that seems like an impossibility at first – it takes time to build your muscles, but you'll get there.



How many should I do?

Just like any muscle, the pelvic floor requires a regular routine to keep it strong and healthy. It's important to try to do these exercises daily if you want to see improvement. The good news is that once you get the hang of it, you can do Kegels anywhere, and nobody will ever know. Try incorporating a set while you're waiting at a stoplight, in line at the grocery store or watching your favorite television show.

Here's our suggestion for a routine you can start this week:

- Begin by performing your **long hold** Kegels. Start with 8 - 10 reps, holding each contraction for 3 - 5 seconds. As your strength increases, work up to 5 - 7 seconds, and finally 7 - 10 seconds.
- Perform 10 **quick flick** contractions.
- Perform these reps 2 - 3 times daily.

Keep track of your progress

A good goal to shoot for with your exercise regimen is to develop consistent control of your pelvic floor muscles, including a lift of up to 10 seconds during your long hold Kegels. Like all exercises, progress can be slow at times, but the long-term results will become very noticeable.

One way to stay on course towards better bladder health is with NAFC's easy-to-use pelvic floor exercise tracker. You'll find one in this brochure, and you can download additional copies free of charge by visiting NAFC.org/kegel-exercises. In fact, that's a great page to visit for even more information about Kegels and how they can help you on your path towards a life without leaks.

You're Not Alone

There are additional therapies you may want to consider, treatments that you may not be aware of but that have delivered significant relief to literally hundreds of thousands of patients.

*You'll be
back to normal
before you
know it!*



For more information regarding urinary incontinence, please visit www.nafc.org.

This brochure was funded through a Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) Eugene Washington PCORI Engagement Award (EADI-38455).

The statements presented in this brochure are solely the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute® (PCORI®), its Board of Governors or Methodology Committee.

6-Week Pelvic Floor Exercise Program Tracker

Week _____

Complete one sheet per week to track your progress performing pelvic floor muscle exercises. Record the number of reps you perform in each set and the number of sets you perform per day.

Use the “notes” space to record any additional information that you feel may be relevant; for example, the length of time you were able to hold a contraction, if the exercise felt easier or harder, etc.

Exercise Name	DAY 1		DAY 2		DAY 3		DAY 4		DAY 5		DAY 6		DAY 7	
	Reps Per Set	#Sets per Day	Reps Per Set	#Sets per Day	Reps Per Set	#Sets per Day	Reps Per Set	#Sets per Day	Reps Per Set	#Sets per Day	Reps Per Set	#Sets per Day	Reps Per Set	#Sets per Day
	Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:	
	Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:	
	Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:	
	Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:	
	Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:	
	Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:		Notes:	

Provided by the National Association For Continence; visit www.nafc.org for more information, locate a special specialist, and find support.

There's no shame in being
human