

The Pelvic Floor

Don't ignore this important set of muscles

Many of the most embarrassing, and least talked about, health problems arise from weaknesses in the pelvic floor. Both men and women experience conditions caused by a weak or damaged pelvic floor, but they're more common in women. Exercises and lifestyle changes can help strengthen it to correct and prevent issues like incontinence and prolapsed organs.

The Pelvic Floor

The pelvic floor is the bottom of the torso, and consists of three layers, made up of muscles, ligaments and nerves. Together the three layers form a sling or hammock that supports the weight of your pelvic organs and helps maintain their proper functions. For women these are the bladder, uterus, rectum and small intestine. Leslie Howard, a yoga teacher from the San Francisco Bay Area who specializes in the pelvic floor, sometimes refers to the pelvic floor as your grocery bag, which works together with your abdominals to create a strong core.

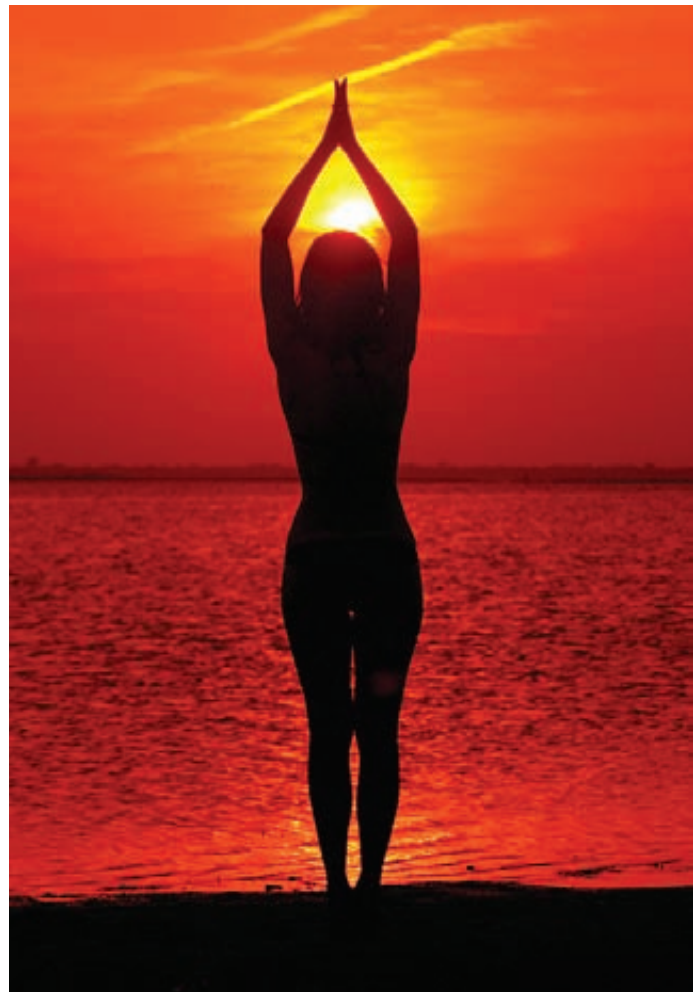
Too Tight, or Too Loose?

In our culture, being too tight "down there" is better than being too loose, but being too tight, or tone, can cause problems like urge incontinence. To begin your pelvic floor practice you need to find out what type you are, loose or tight, and to do that requires a self-exam. "No one ever told me to do this," says Howard. "It's one more way to keep yourself healthy." The books "Ending Female Pain," by Isa Herrera and "Wild Feminine" by Tami Kent have pelvic massage instructions. Once you know what you're starting with, you can do exercises appropriate for your type. Kegels are useless to someone who is too tight, and could make conditions worse. Instead, focusing on relaxing the area is the first step to making it stronger.

Kegels Aren't Enough

Kegel exercises are OK when done properly, but more important than Kegels are lifestyle changes, including posture correction and learning how to relieve yourself without strain. Believe it or not, reading the last chapter in your book or today's front page doesn't help you go better. In fact, spending more time on the toilet than you need to can cause further weakness and problems in the pelvic area. "Sitting on the toilet doesn't put your pelvis in the optimal position and you end up having to push," says Howard. If you can't get into the optimal position — squatting — you should at least place your feet on a high footstool to help correct it.

Also, correct posture is key. We sit and slouch too much. During the day, you need to get up and move around to restore blood flow



to the pelvis, which decreases after about 20 minutes of inactivity. Exercises that improve your posture will help correct any spine distortion you have and lessen the stress put on your pelvic floor muscles.

Once you've worked on the basics, you can practice exercises specifically designed for the pelvic floor, and after you've built strength in your pelvic floor, you can incorporate abdominal exercises into your practice. Excessive abdominal exercises are moot if you lack tone in your pelvic floor. "Remember, the pelvic floor is the bottom of the torso," says Howard. "If you just exercise your front, all your groceries will fall out."

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