

Continence Advice Leaflet

Physiotherapy

Introduction

This leaflet is for parents of younger children with continence problems or the teenager who would like to learn more about their condition and how physiotherapy can help.

What is the Pelvic Floor?

Layers of muscle stretch like a hammock from the pubic bone in front to the bottom of the backbone between your legs. These supportive muscles are called the pelvic floor. They help to close the bladder outlet and back passage.

How does the Pelvic Floor work?

The muscles of the pelvic floor are kept firm and slightly tense to stop leakage of urine from the bladder or faeces from the bowel. When you pass water or have a bowel motion the pelvic floor muscles relax. Afterwards, they tighten again and restore control.

What makes these muscles weak?

There are many different causes of poor bladder control in children. Repeated urinary tract infections or constipation can be causes of weakening of these muscles. However a specific cause is not always found and poor control is felt to be due to weak ineffective muscles. This is often made worse by exercise or when coughing, sneezing or laughing.

How can Pelvic Floor exercises help?

Pelvic floor exercises can strengthen these muscles so that they give support. This will improve bladder control and improve or stop leakage of urine. Like any muscles in the body, the more you use them and exercise them, the stronger the pelvic floor will be.

Learning to do Pelvic Floor exercises

These are two main parts to the exercises:

1. Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Now imagine trying to stop yourself passing wind from the bowel. Try squeezing and lifting that muscle as if you really do have wind. To do this you must squeeze the muscles around the back passage. You should be able to feel the muscle move. Your buttocks and legs should not move at all. You should be aware of the skin around the back passage tightening and being pulled up and away from your chair.
2. Now try and imagine that you are sitting on the toilet passing urine. Picture yourself trying to stop the stream of urine. Really pretend to try stopping it. You should be using the same group of muscles that you used before, but don't be surprised if you find this harder than step 1.

Now try doing steps 1 and 2 together. This is a pelvic floor contraction.

Practicing your exercises

1. You may find it easier to practice your exercises lying down first.
2. Pull up slowly and hold tightened for **at least 5 seconds** if you can, then relax. **Repeat at least 5 times**. These are slow pull-ups.
3. Now pull the muscles up quickly and tightly, and relax immediately. **Repeat at least 5 times**. These are fast pull-ups.
4. Do the above exercises – **5 slow and 5 fast** – at least three times a day.
5. As the muscles get stronger, you will find that you can hold for longer than 5 seconds, and that you can do more than 5 pull-ups each time without the muscles getting tired. It takes time for exercises to make muscles stronger. It will take several weeks for you to notice improvements but the muscles will gain strength if you stick at it.

Mid stream stops

From time to time it can be helpful when you go to the toilet to pass urine, to try to stop the flow half-way through. Once you have stopped the flow of urine relax again and allow the bladder to empty completely. You may only be able to slow the stream. This can help you to feel the sensation needed to carry out the exercises and also to help to monitor your progress. As the muscles strengthen it should become easier. This should not be done with every toilet visit as evidence shows that if done repeatedly it may lead to backflow of urine into the bladder and increase bladder infections.

Other tips to help gain bladder control

1. Get into a routine of regularly practicing your exercises with Mum or Dad – they can help you learn to do your exercises and remember to do them.
2. If you are unsure that you are squeezing the correct muscle you can sit on top of your hand. You should be able to feel your pelvic floor muscles tighten and pull away from your hand.
3. Drink normal amounts – but avoid drinks with caffeine in where possible. Drinks with caffeine, such as fizzy juice and tea or coffee, make you need to go to the toilet more urgently than other drinks. Also try avoiding drinking in the two hours before going to bed.
4. It is very important to train your bladder to go to the toilet at appropriate times. Following assessment the physiotherapist may advise you to go more or less frequently.
5. Try to go to the toilet in time so that you don't feel desperate and panicky by the time you get there.
6. When you go to the toilet give yourself time to relax so that your bladder can empty fully.

7. Once you have gone to the toilet, stand up and march on the spot, then sit down. Try to go to the toilet again to ensure your bladder is empty.
8. Once you have regained control of your bladder, don't forget your exercises. Continue to do your pelvic floor exercises a few times each day to ensure that the problem does not come back.

If you have problems doing the exercises or don't understand any part of the information sheet ask your Physiotherapist; or contact the Physiotherapy Department at The Royal Hospital for Children and Young People, Edinburgh on 0131 312 1079.

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