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## Pelvic Floor Exercises

These exercises are designed to help your body's natural continence mechanisms work optimally to control unwanted urinary leakage with strenuous activity (stress incontinence). They can also help control daytime frequency and urgency to urinate (urge incontinence).

The pelvic floor muscles provide support to pelvic organs, such as the bladder. This support prevents urinary leakage during times of increased intra-abdominal pressure such as heavy exercise, lifting, coughing, sneezing or laughing. The pelvic floor muscles are voluntarily controlled, but also contract as a reflex in response to coughing, for example. By strengthening these muscles you can improve this reflex response and limit urinary incontinence. Normally, an individual can interrupt their urinary stream by contracting the muscles of the pelvic floor. Similarly, contracting the pelvic floor muscles is what enables an individual to keep from passing gas or "hold back" a bowel movement. These examples are given to try to fix a picture in your mind's eye of the muscle group and type of voluntary contractions that you will be trying to work on with these exercises.

In order to strengthen these muscles you must be aware of the difference between the pelvic muscles described above and the abdominal muscles. The abdominal muscles are what an individual normally contracts when they are trying to push, as with a bowel movement if constipated. The abdominal muscles must be kept relaxed in order to maximally work the pelvic muscles. This so-called *muscle awareness training* can be assisted through the use of special sensors in your doctor's office.

Once you have isolated the proper muscle groups it is important to emphasize that to optimally strengthen the pelvic floor muscles, you must maximally relax the abdominal muscles during your exercises. When you have located the correct muscles, set aside 3-4 times each day for exercising: morning, midday and evening. Squeeze your muscles of the pelvic floor to the slow count of 1-2-3-4. Then relax these muscles completely to the slow count of 1-2-3-4. This makes one set. Complete ten sets during each of your daily sessions.

If your pelvic muscles are weak, begin by contracting them for only 3-5 seconds. In a few weeks, you should be able to increase the amount of time you are able to hold the contraction and the number of exercise sets you are able to do. Your goal is to hold each contraction for 10 seconds, to relax for 10 seconds and to complete 10-15 sets. In the beginning, check yourself by looking in the mirror or by placing a hand on your abdomen and buttocks to be sure you do not feel your belly, thigh or buttock muscles.

You should do one of your sets standing, one sitting, and one lying down.

Helpful tips:

1. Learn to squeeze before you sneeze, cough, or pick up something heavy.
2. Watch your weight. Obesity makes bladder control more difficult.
3. Avoid smoking. Smoker's cough makes the entire problem more difficult.
4. Incorporate the exercises into your daily routines.

Once you get better at the exercises:

Do them every day, 10-15 at a time, relaxing in between.

Do 10-15 laying down in the morning.

Do 10-15 sitting in the afternoon.

Do 10-15 standing at night... or some similar regimen.

For each set, squeeze for 10 seconds and relax for 10 seconds. The relaxation time should be longer at first until your muscles become stronger.

Relax the muscles of your abdomen when you do the exercises and breathe normally.

Once a day, initially practice slowing or stopping the stream of urine when you void to reinforce the correct pelvic floor contraction.