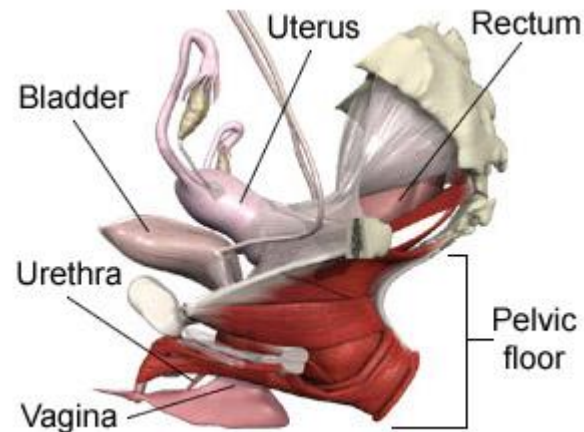




What is the Pelvic Floor?

The pelvic floor is a set of muscles that spread across the bottom of the pelvic cavity like a hammock. The pelvic floor has three openings that run through it, the urethra, the vagina, and the rectum. The functions of the pelvic floor include:

- To support the pelvic organs, specifically the uterus, the bladder, and the rectum
- To help provide sphincter control for the bladder and bowel
- To withstand increases in pressure that occur in the abdomen such as coughing, sneezing, laughing, straining, and lifting
- To enhance the sexual response



How does pregnancy affect your Pelvic Floor?

Pregnancy and child birth place a lot of stress on your pelvic floor. Some of the ways your pelvic floor can be weakened include:

Weight of the uterus	During pregnancy, the pelvic floor muscles may begin to sag and weaken due to the increased weight of your uterus.
Hormones	The relaxing effects of hormones that are produced during pregnancy in order to allow you to deliver your baby can also weaken your pelvic floor.
Extreme stretching	Vaginal delivery extensively stretches your pelvic floor muscles, leaving them weakened.
Episiotomies and tears	Sometimes during vaginal delivery, the pelvic floor muscles will tear. Occasionally a doctor will perform an episiotomy, where a cut is made into your pelvic floor to assist with vaginal delivery. This incision may tear further as the baby passes through the birth canal. Tears and episiotomies weaken the pelvic floor muscles. There are 4 grades of tears, with the higher grades causing more damage to the pelvic floor:

Grade 1: The skin of the perineum is torn

Grade 2: The skin of the perineum and part of the pelvic floor muscles are torn. This is the equivalent of an episiotomy incision.

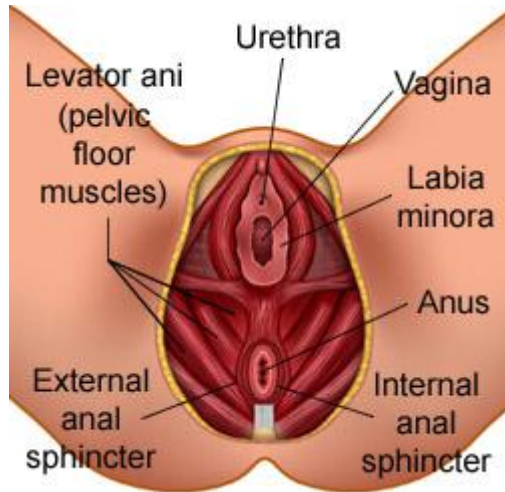
Grade 3: The skin of the perineum, the pelvic floor muscles, and part of the external anal sphincter are torn.

Grade 4: The skin of the perineum, the pelvic floor muscles, the entire external anal sphincter, and part of the internal anal sphincter are torn.

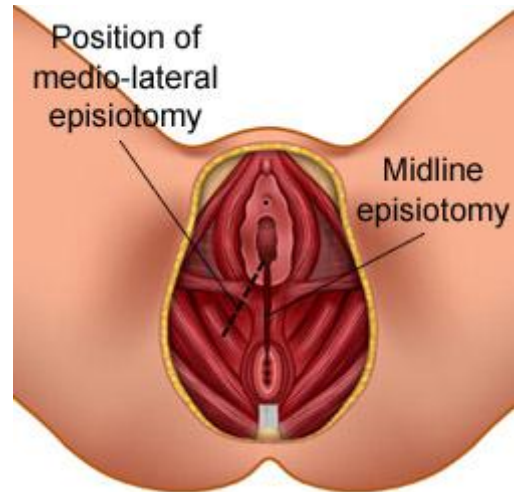
Forceps and vacuums

The use of forceps and vacuums can cause damage to your pelvic floor. Additionally they can cause damage to the nerves that supply your pelvic floor, causing further weakness.

Even women who have Cesarean sections can have weakness in the pelvic floor as a result of the changes that occur to the body during the months of pregnancy.



The pelvic floor from below - Showing the pelvic floor muscles spreading across the pelvic cavity and the anus, vagina and urethra passing through them.



An episiotomy - Where a cut is made into the pelvic floor to assist with vaginal delivery.

Coping with pelvic floor and perineal discomfort immediately after birth:

The perineum is the area between your vagina and anus and can be very tender following delivery, especially if you have had stitches for an episiotomy or a tear. You may be bruised and swollen even if you did not have any tearing occur. It is important to take proper care of your perineum in order to avoid infection. It will also help relieve discomfort and promote healing of the area.

The following are some tips for perineal care following delivery:

- Ice your perineum immediately after delivery and for a few days following. A frozen perineal pad or crushed ice in a frozen wet washcloth wrapped in a thin towel works well.
- Freeze a perineal pad soaked in witch hazel. Witch hazel helps relieve pain from a tear, episiotomy or hemorrhoids.
- Use a "Peri Bottle." This allows you to pour warm water over your perineum after using the restroom. Be sure to pour from front to back to prevent the spread of organisms from your rectal area into the perineum.
- When cleaning yourself after using the restroom try to pat yourself rather than wipe. This minimizes pulling of the tender skin. Also go in the direction from front to back in order to decrease the spread of organisms from the rectal area into the perineum.
- Use a sitz bath to relieve perineal tenderness. Use warm or cold water and soak your perineal area for 10 to 20 minutes. Calendula placed in the water can provide additional relief. Your health care provider may prescribe other preparations to increase relief.
- Perform pelvic floor muscle exercises, such as Kegels.
- Sit in a way that provides comfort to your perineal area. Some women prefer to sit on a hard surface for support of the perineum, while others prefer to sit on a donut or nursing pillow in order to avoid pressure on the perineum. Do what feels comfortable to you.
- Lay down as often as you can for the first two weeks. When standing, swelling of the perineum increases. Use this time to bond with your baby in bed.
- When having a bowel movement, you may find it more comfortable to support the perineum with your fingers wrapped in toilet paper.
- Do not use tampons until you have been cleared by your doctor or midwife.
- Do not douche until you have been cleared by your doctor or midwife.

If you had stitches from an episiotomy or tear they will dissolve in two to four weeks. The tissue is usually healed in four to six weeks. During intercourse, some women experience pain at the location of tear or episiotomy. This may last for several months following delivery. If the pain does not improve, speak to your health care provider. There are treatment techniques that can help with painful intercourse (dyspareunia).

What are the consequences of a weak Pelvic Floor?

Weak pelvic floor muscles can result in pelvic organ prolapse (when one of your pelvic organs falls out of place). Prolapse can occur to your bladder, urethra, uterus, rectum, intestine, and vagina. Other consequences of a weak pelvic floor include the involuntary leakage of urine or fecal matter (urinary and fecal incontinence).

How can I help strengthen my Pelvic Floor?

Regular exercise of the pelvic floor muscles, such as Kegels, will improve and maintain the strength in these muscles. In addition to improving the strength of the pelvic floor muscles, Kegels have the following benefits:

- Improves blood circulation in the perineal area, which speeds up healing
- Decreases pelvic congestion and heaviness felt during pregnancy and after child birth
- Reduces pressure and helps heal stitches and tears
- Relieves perineal tenderness
- Decreases the discomfort of swelling and varicose veins in the vulva
- Decreases the discomfort of hemorrhoids
- Decreases menstrual cramps
- Helps increase vaginal lubrication
- Makes future vaginal deliveries quicker, and more comfortable. Strong pelvic floor muscles are less likely to tear during vaginal delivery and recover more quickly
- Improve the sexual response for both you and your partner

It is safe to begin performing Kegel exercises immediately after delivery. When you first attempt to perform a pelvic floor contraction following delivery, you may feel as though nothing happened. This is because the muscles have been traumatized and lose some of their sensation after delivery. Do not let this discourage you, it does not mean that you cannot do the exercises. Be patient, and take the time to focus on your Kegels. As the muscles recover and begin to work more efficiently, you will begin to feel more sensation of tightening and relaxing when you do the exercises. It is important to continue Kegels even after the postpartum period. Maintaining a strong pelvic floor throughout life can prevent problems in the future and should remain a part of your regular exercise routine.

What else can I do to help my Pelvic Floor?

During the postpartum period and while breastfeeding, the pelvic floor is in a weakened state, which decreases the support the pelvic organs have and increases the likelihood to suffer from a prolapse.

In order to decrease the chances of a prolapse the following tips are useful:

- Avoid heavy straining during bowel movements
- Increase your daily intake of fiber and fluid to prevent constipation
- Think about contracting your pelvic floor before you sneeze or cough
- If you feel a prolonged coughing spell coming on, try sitting on a hard surface or exercise ball to help provide support to your pelvic floor
- Avoid repetitive heavy lifting