

A KEGEL a day keeps the DOCTOR away

Mary Ann is a 45-year-old woman who loses urine (incontinence) when she coughs and sneezes. She is provided with exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles of her bladder. She does the exercises every day for 12 weeks and has significant improvement in her urinary symptoms.

There are many conditions that put stress on your pelvic floor muscles, such as childbirth through vaginal deliveries, obesity, chronic coughing, and after menopause when there is a deficiency of estrogen, the female hormone produced in the ovaries.

When your pelvic floor muscles weaken, your pelvic organs descend and bulge into your vagina, a condition known as pelvic organ prolapse. The effects of pelvic organ prolapse range from uncomfortable pelvic pressure to leakage of urine or feces. Fortunately, Kegel exercises can strengthen pelvic muscles and delay or maybe even prevent pelvic organ prolapse.

HOW TO PERFORM KEGEL EXERCISES

It takes diligence to identify your pelvic floor muscles and learn how to contract and relax them. You can learn to identify the proper pelvic muscles by trying to stop the flow of urine while you're going to the bathroom.

If you're having trouble finding the right muscles, don't be embarrassed to ask for help. Your doctor can give you important feedback so that you learn to isolate and exercise the correct muscles.

After you've identified your pelvic floor muscles, contract your pelvic floor muscles and hold the contraction for three seconds, then relax for three seconds. Repeat this exercise 10 times. After you have learned how to contract the pelvic muscles for 3 seconds, work up to keeping the muscles contracted for 10 seconds at a time, relaxing for 10 seconds between contractions. Perform a set of 10 Kegel exercises three times a day. The exercises will get easier the more often you do them. You might make a practice of fitting in a set every time you do a routine task, such as sitting at a red light.

For those women who have trouble doing Kegel exercises, biofeedback training or electrical stimulation may help. In a biofeedback session, a nurse, therapist or technician will either insert a small monitoring probe into your vagina or place adhesive electrodes on the skin outside your vagina or rectal area. When you contract your pelvic floor muscles, you'll see a measurement on a



monitor that lets you know whether you've successfully contracted the right muscles. You'll also be able to see how long you hold the contraction.

Results are not immediate or the first time you do the exercises. You can expect to see some results, such as less frequent urine leakage, within about 8 to 12 weeks. Your improvement may be dramatic — or, at the very least, you may keep your problems from worsening. As with other forms of physical activity, you need to make Kegel exercises a lifelong practice to reap lifelong rewards.

AN ADDED BONUS: Kegel exercises may be helpful for women who have persistent problems reaching orgasm.

BOTTOM LINE: Many women have a problem with loss of urine when coughing and sneezing. Kegel exercises are effective for very mild urinary incontinence. It's inexpensive, does not require use of medication, and if you are patient, it does, indeed, work.



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