

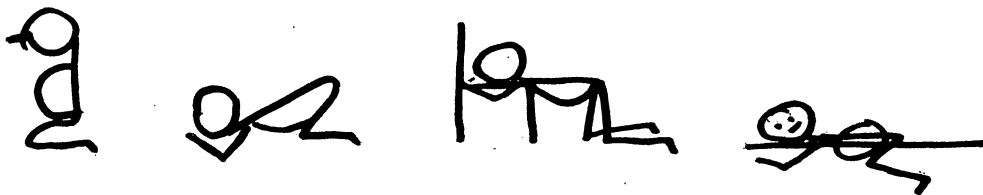
Pelvic floor muscle exercises

The pelvic floor is a hammock of muscles at the base of the body which hangs from the pubic front at the front of the pelvis right through to the tailbone (coccyx) at the back of the pelvis. There are three openings in the pelvic floor in the woman: the urethra at the very front (and up towards the clitoral ring), the vagina or birth canal towards the middle, and the anus at the back. The perineal tissues are therefore part of the pelvic floor.

In pregnancy, it is as important to learn to **release** the pelvic floor as it is to **tone** it. This is because you will birth your baby so much more easily when you can relax your pelvic floor completely. Some women spend a lot of time lifting and strengthening the pelvic floor, for example during aerobics or strong forms of yoga. During birth, the vagina stretches wide so we want it to be elastic and to be able to relax. So during pregnancy we both tone *and* release!

During these practices there are no visible external movements. The abdominal muscles remain relaxed. You will find these practices easier the more you practise them. At first you may find it hard to distinguish between the different parts of the pelvic floor and feel unable to move them separately. With practice you will become more familiar with this ability and this will help you when it comes to birthing.

It is important to find a position to practice in which you are both comfortable and able to relax. Aim to have a long back or if you are sitting then sit tall and upright. Different positions can feel easier for different parts of the pelvic floor, for example: kneeling can be good for the anal practice; knees-chest position (where you are on all fours and leaning down into your forearms so that your pelvis is higher than your chest which eases pressure on the pelvic floor) can make it easier to work around the vaginal area. Avoid taking the head lower than the chest if you have high blood pressure – you can lean into a chair or birthing ball.



So get comfortable and tune into your breathing. Relax your face and your jaw – your jaw and your pelvic floor are linked so if your jaw relaxes your pelvic floor will too! Breathe in through your nose but you can breathe out either through your nose or your mouth, whichever feels most easeful.

Apply the following rule to all these pelvic floor practices: coordinate the exercises with your breathing by **tensing muscles on the inhalation and releasing muscles on the exhalation**. The breath continues to flow at all times during the practice – no holding of the breath.

1) Right at the back – anal squeeze or ashwini mudra

Breathe in and as you breathe out feel that you can place your breath and awareness right down to the base of the spine, **towards the anal sphincter**. Hold your awareness there and as you inhale **squeeze the ring of muscle around your anus**. Breathe out and release. No holding of breath or of the squeeze. Repeat five more times following the natural rhythm of your breath. Keep your buttocks completely relaxed. Check the jaw is also remaining relaxed.

2) Right at the front – the urethra closure or sahajoli mudra

Breathe in and as you breathe out feel that you can place your breath and awareness right down to the base of the spine. Now move your attention **forward right under the pubic bone**. With rapid short movements, squeeze and release alternately the short muscles that control the exit to your urethra. No holding of the breath or of the squeeze. Repeat five more times following the natural rhythm of your breath.

3) Deep inside – the big lift or moola bandha

Breathe in and as you breathe out feel you can place your breath and awareness right down to the base of the spine. Now move your attention to the **middle or 'belly' of the pelvic floor muscles**, between the two extremes of back and front of the two previous practices. Take your focus deeper inside. As you breathe in lift the muscles inside the vagina right up high. Breathe out and release, lowering back down. The feeling is much more that of a lift than a squeeze. No holding of the breath or of the lift. Raise on the inhalation, lower back down on the exhalation. Check you have completely relaxed your pelvic floor at the end of the outbreath. Repeat five more times following the natural rhythm of your breath.

Aim to repeat the above practices several times a week. As you get more proficient at it, you will be able to do it in a range of everyday positions and movements. As your labour approaches the lifting up naturally becomes harder so just focus on releasing the pelvic floor with the out-breath which is fantastic preparation for birthing.

Come slowly out of the position and have a nice stretch.

Thanks to Birthlight and to Leigh McEllan (www.innerpeaceyoga.co.uk) for passing on these practices.