

Exercises to condition the

by Kelli Berzuk, B.A., B.Sc.

To address weak pelvic floor muscles (pfm) in older adults, fitness and wellness professionals must first ensure that clients become proficient in contracting these muscles (see “Contracting the pelvic floor muscles: exercises for beginners” on page 37). These movements will increase pfm strength and endurance in most individuals. Once improvement is noted, what then? Clients can progress to incorporating pfm contractions into regular exercise routines, as well as activities of daily living.

Exercises and activities that involve contracting the abdominal muscles will increase intraabdominal pressure, producing a downward pressure on the pelvic floor musculature. To protect this area, clients can try to contract their pfm *before* recruiting the abdominal muscles. The following exercises are examples of where pfm contraction throughout the movement has both fitness and functional benefits.



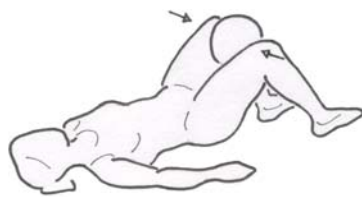
A. The Bridge

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, slightly separated. Relax and remember to breathe normally.
2. Contract your pfm, slowly drawing these muscles into your abdomen and toward your head. Imagine you are trying not to lose urine or pass gas.
3. Next, raise your hips off the floor, trying to make a straight line from your knees to your shoulders. While raising your body into this position, your pfm should remain firmly contracted.
4. Hold this position for 10 seconds.

5. Lower your body to the floor.
6. Finally, relax your pfm fully.
7. Repeat this exercise 5–10 times.

By ensuring the pfm is the first area to contract and the last to relax, clients can counteract the downward intra-abdominal pressure on the pfm.

Tip: If this exercise increases hip discomfort in clients, especially those who have undergone hip replacement surgery, professionals should modify this movement. In these circumstances, clients should raise their hips to six inches off the ground, instead of trying to make a straight line from knees to shoulders.



B. Squeeze-the-Ball

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, slightly separated. Relax and remember to breathe normally.
2. Place a 6–8 inch ball between your knees.
3. Contract your pfm, slowly drawing it into your abdomen and toward your head. Imagine you are trying not to lose urine or pass gas.
4. Now, squeeze the ball with your knees, to superimpose hip adductor muscle contraction onto the pfm contraction.
5. Squeeze the ball firmly for a count of 10 seconds.
6. Release the squeeze and relax your hips.
7. Finally, relax your pfm fully.
8. Repeat this exercise 5–10 times.

This exercise is especially good for people who have difficulty contracting or isolating their pfm, as recruitment of

these muscles is often associated with hip adductor contraction.

Tip: Fitness and wellness professionals can substitute a folded pillow for the ball.

Working the pelvic floor muscles in daily activities

Older clients can take the approach illustrated in the traditional exercises above and use it for activities of daily living. This involves activating and recruiting the pfm during daily activities that increase intraabdominal pressure, thereby counteracting the downward pressure on the pfm.

Individuals with urinary or anal incontinence (both gas or loss of stool) should note the activities they are involved in when problems arise. They can then practice contracting the pfm during these specific activities.

For example, a client who leaks urine when bending down to pick up the car should contract the pfm before bending. This contraction will not only compensate for the increase in intraabdominal pressure, but also produce better closure to the urethral sphincter. In addition, contracting these muscles will support the internal pelvic organs, such as the bladder, and therefore position the organs to function properly.

An individual who experiences leakage during golfing should practice swinging a golf club while maintaining a pfm contraction. At first, it may help to mock a golf swing without holding a club. This will allow the person to concentrate on holding the pfm contraction, while the arms, torso, hips and lower limbs follow through the swinging motion. The client can try this movement with a club in hand once he or she finds the mock swing easy and feels confident that the pfm contracts

pelvic floor muscles

before the swing, stays contracted during the movement, and remains contracted until actively relaxed after the follow through. The weight of the club will probably make the exercise more difficult initially. However, the movement will become easier with practice.

Say someone enjoys curling and leaks urine while throwing a rock. This person must learn to contract the pfm *while* opening the pelvis as the rock is released. He or she can reenact this crouching position at home while doing long-hold pfm contractions (as described on page 37). The client may find it quite a challenge to contract the pfm in this stretched position. When the movement becomes easy, he or she can then practice it in a cold arena. Cold will often have a negative effect on the bladder muscle and

lead to feelings of urgency. As well, the pfm may be sluggish to contract when cold. For these reasons, a client should begin this exercise in a warmer environment and avoid adding the stress of cold temperatures until prepared for this progression.

Older adults who incorporate pfm contractions into their activities of daily living will probably begin to contract these muscles subconsciously. Eventually, they may develop the habit of contracting the pfm during daily activities. By contracting their pfm during traditional exercises and/or daily activities, many older adults will strengthen these muscles and reduce their problems with incontinence.☞

Kelli Berzuk, B.A., B.Sc., BMR-PT, CAFCI, is a physiotherapist and the

director of IPPC—Incontinence & Pelvic Pain Clinic (division of Nova Physiotherapy & Sports Fitness Clinic), located in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. For the past 11 years, she has concentrated on the treatment of incontinence and pelvic floor muscle dysfunction for women and men and enuresis/encopresis in children. Further information on incorporating pelvic floor muscle contractions during traditional and functional exercises and activities of daily living is available in Berzuk's book, I Laughed So Hard I Peed My Pants! A Woman's Essential Guide for Improved Bladder Control. (See "Resources" on page 36 for more information about this book.)

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