



# Digestive Health in Menopause

## Week 4

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# Is My Pelvic Floor Health Connected to My Digestive Health?

## Aims

- To understand the role of the pelvic floor
- To identify when you may be experiencing a pelvic floor issue
- To learn techniques to support your pelvic floor and digestive health

Over 60% of UK women have at least one symptom relating to pelvic floor dysfunction (RCOG, 2023). Knowing about the pelvic floor, its role and function and how the muscles can be activated can make a huge difference to an individual's quality of life.

## The Pelvic Floor

The pelvic floor is a hammock of muscles encased within a bony structure at the base of the pelvis. These muscles play five important roles in the body:

### 1. Organ support and pressure management.

The pelvic floor muscles support the bladder, uterus, rectum (as well as other abdominal organs) against gravity and any added downward pressure.

### 2. Stability

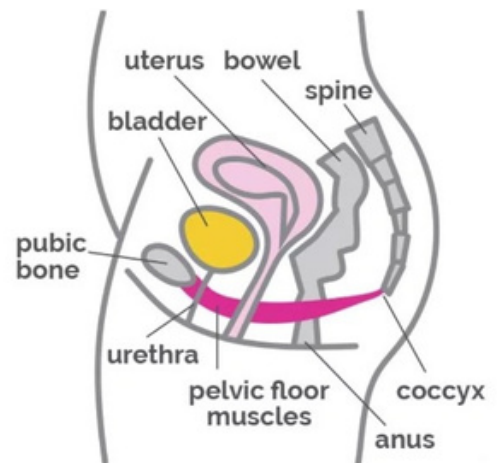
The pelvic floor is one of four muscles making up our 'core', which stabilises our pelvis and lower back.

### 3. Sphincteric function

Pelvic floor muscles are the muscles which control both the opening and closing of the urethra (where urine comes out), and rectum, (where faeces and/or gas come out). The pelvic floor muscles should work to prevent leakage of urine, stool and wind.

### 4. Sexual Function

The pelvic floor assists with sexual performance and arousal, as well as playing a role in orgasm.



## 5. Circulation

The pelvic floor muscles act as a 'sump pump' to move blood and lymph fluid.

## Signs of A Pelvic Floor Problem

Common signs that can indicate a pelvic floor problem include:

- Leaking urine/stool or gas with cough, sneeze, exercise or laugh
- Strong urge to get to the toilet or not making it there in time
- Persistent need to go to the toilet
- Difficulty with emptying bladder or bowel
- Sensation of vaginal bulge or a feeling of heaviness, discomfort, pulling, dragging or dropping
- Pain within the pelvic area
- Pain with intercourse
- Struggling to insert/ keep a tampon or menstrual cup within the vagina
- Recurrent bladder infections/cystitis/ bladder pain
- Pain with passing urine/stool

## Why do pelvic floor problems occur?

Pelvic floor problems can occur when the pelvic floor muscles are overly stretched, weakened or too tight.

Some have pelvic floor issues from an early age, whilst others notice problems after certain life stages such as pregnancy, childbirth or menopause.

Other reasons individuals experience pelvic floor muscle issues:

- Having experienced a long second stage of labor (active, pushing stage), had an instrumental delivery (forceps), or sustaining perineal trauma (3rd or 4th degree tear)
- Constipation and straining to empty
- Being overweight or obese
- Repeated heavy lifting (work/ exercise)
- Chronic cough/sneeze (smokers cough/respiratory issues/ allergies)
- Previous injury to the pelvic/ abdominal region (falls/ surgery/pelvic radiotherapy)
- Ageing

Although hidden from view, the pelvic floor muscles can be consciously controlled and relaxed and therefore trained, much like the arm, leg or abdominal muscles.

## Could Your Digestive Symptoms be Related to Your Pelvic Floor Health?

- Not all digestive problems are directly caused by pelvic floor dysfunction.
- However, many people who have weak, overactive or tight pelvic floor muscles may also experience gut health problems, such as incontinence, chronic constipation or abdominal bloating.
- Additionally, some with food intolerances, GERD, or other digestion problems might notice that their symptoms get worse after experiencing some sort of trauma or condition affecting their pelvic floor.

# What can you do to improve your digestive and pelvic floor health?

- Become pelvic floor aware by commencing pelvic floor exercises to work on building up muscular strength or work on breathing and stretches to encourage tight muscles to “let go and relax”.
- Improve your diet by drinking adequate fluids and eating fibre rich foods to reduce the risk of constipation
- Invest in a poo step
  - Have your feet raised upon a toddler stool/step/ toilet rolls/ books, with your arms resting comfortably on your legs.
  - Keeping everything relaxed, visualise your back passage gently softening and opening.
  - Avoid holding your breath and instead try to have a relaxed breathing pattern and MOO YOUR POO!
  - By gently saying moo/hiss or just by performing some nice controlled inhales and exhales the diaphragm works like an internal piston; working with the pelvic floor to expel the stool.
- Minimise stress by considering mindfulness or relaxation exercises, working on your sleep hygiene and taking regular exercise.
- Find a pelvic health physiotherapist. A pelvic health physiotherapist can provide a tailored exercise plan. Therapists can be found within the NHS, private hospitals and independent clinics. The POGP (Pelvic, Obstetric & Gynaecological Physiotherapists) are a professional network of physiotherapists who are members of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy and work with men and women who experience pelvic floor issues.
  - <https://thepogp.co.uk/patients/physiotherapists/>
  - [https://thepogp.co.uk/news/8/find\\_a\\_physio\\_with\\_the\\_squeezy\\_directory/](https://thepogp.co.uk/news/8/find_a_physio_with_the_squeezy_directory/)



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