

It's not just about the kegels: how pelvic floor awareness can help you control your sexual health

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A google search of the words "sex" and "pelvic floor" reveals that over half a million sites exist which link the "love muscle" to better sex. Pelvic floor exercises, also known as "kegels" are meant to make your vagina tighter, your orgasms stronger and your sex life more satisfying. Men are encouraged to build up their pelvic floors as well, as a way to improve their erection and control the timing of their ejaculation.

Though little is known about how the pelvic floor muscles actually do function in sexual activity, there are a number of studies which show that pelvic floor muscle training exercises do help improve sexual response in both men and women. In addition to the sexual benefits, pelvic floor exercises are effective in preventing and treating urinary incontinence. However, because these muscles are not visible to the eye, like the biceps for example, many people are unsure of exactly where and how they should be squeezing.

While many articles, books and websites laud the use of "kegel" exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor and thus improve sexual response, and various home devices from vaginal weights to pressure biofeedback machines are marketed to help muscle strengthening, the fact is, that many people are simply not aware of where these muscles are, and how to find them. In fact, studies have shown that when given verbal instruction only, 50% of people actually understand how to properly exercise the pelvic floor muscles. When performed incorrectly, conditions such as prolapse, urinary incontinence and back pain could actually be exacerbated. Furthermore, many people have poor habits in their daily activities, such as straining with bowel movements, which can weaken the pelvic floor muscles.

The pelvic floor is important for many reasons. Not only does it enhance sexual function, but also it acts to support the internal organs, and to provide closure of the urethral and anal sphincters, which prevents incontinence. The strength and tone of the pelvic floor are affected by factors such as pregnancy, childbirth, chronic coughing or

constipation, or even an occupation that has involved prolonged standing, heavy lifting, or straining.

The pelvic floor, which is comprised of muscle and connective tissue, attaches from the bone of the pubis in front to the bone of the coccyx in back, so that it is situated as a bowl like structure right underneath the pelvic organs and surrounding the genitalia. When the pelvic floor muscles are weak, they fail to provide stability to the internal organs and can even contribute to back pain.

In women, weakness of the pelvic floor can lead to prolapse, which means descent, of one or more of the pelvic organs. This can include the bladder, uterus or rectum. In many cases, the presence of prolapse contributes to discomfort during sexual activity. Pelvic floor weakness also contributes to urinary incontinence. This happens when pressure on the bladder that occurs when one coughs, laughs or sneezes, for example, exceeds the pelvic floor pressure exerted on the urethra, so that urine leaks out. This condition may interfere with sex as well, as some women with pelvic floor weakness are afraid of leakage when having sex.

So, while its always a good idea to do kegel exercises, first make sure you know the basics of keeping you pelvic floor in shape. First thing you need to know, is that the pelvic floor muscles not only close the sphincters, but also act to lift the organs. To find the closure muscles, insert a finger in the vagina, and tighten the muscles around your finger. To facilitate the lifting muscles, take a deep breath, when exhaling, use your vaginal muscle to squeeze your finger and at the same time, pull your naval in towards your spine. This will help you feel a lifting of the internal pelvic floor muscles as well. For men, put a finger on the perineum, which is the area of skin between the scrotum and anus (you may have to lift your penis and scrotum out of the way). Tighten your anal muscles as though you are trying to prevent gas from escaping. Inhale, and then exhale while squeezing and pulling your naval in towards your spine. This will cause you to feel a lifting up of the perineum.

Once you have identified these muscles, it is a good idea to contract them during activities that normally cause them to be weakened. When you are about to cough or sneeze,

quickly contract the muscles to ensure proper sphincter closure. Keep your pelvic floor contracted during activities such as heavy lifting or pushing. Try not to bear down or strain, particularly during bowel movements as that weakens the pelvic floor as well. And finally, consciously contract and relax your pelvic floor muscles during sex, to help improve blood flow to the genitals and enhance the sexual response.