Kegel Exercises for Urinary Incontinence

Whether you experience urge incontinence or stress incontinence, Kegel exercises — performed correctly — can offer relief. By strengthening the muscles that hold urine in the bladder, you can either decrease or possibly eliminate incidences of urinary incontinence. The key to Kegel exercises is identifying the pelvic floor muscles and performing the prescribed routine properly.

WHO SHOULD DO MUSCLE TRAINING EXERCISES?

Anyone who experiences either urge incontinence (an intense urge to urinate that develops suddenly and makes it difficult to get to the bathroom in time) or stress incontinence (loss of urine during activities that increase intra-abdominal pressure like coughing, sneezing or straining) can benefit from Kegel exercises.

HOW DO KEGEL EXERCISES HELP URINARY INCONTINENCE?

Kegel exercises can strengthen the periurethral (in men and women) and perivaginal (in women) muscles that make up the muscles that help you hold urine in your bladder so you can get to the bathroom before urinating. Doing these exercises regularly can decrease the incidences of urinary incontinence you experience, and in a smaller percentage of individuals (10-15 percent) will even totally resolve the incontinence. You need to persist with the exercises, however, to continue to benefit from them.

If you have stress incontinence, once you learn the exercise you will be able to contract your pelvic muscles during sneezing or coughing and decrease the frequency and quantity of urine loss. It will take at least 4-6 weeks for your muscles to get stronger and for you to see the benefit of these exercises. For individuals who are 65 years of age and older, it may take 8 weeks to see the benefit.

HOW TO DO KEGEL EXERCISES

STEP I: Get to know where your pelvic floor muscles are by trying to stop your urine stream while paying attention to the muscles that do this. Place your hand on your lower abdomen to feel if any tightening occurs. You want to avoid tightening your thigh muscles, your buttocks or your abdomen. Do not hold your breath. You should feel a sensation of closing and lifting in as you squeeze the pelvic floor muscles.

STEP II: Perform muscle-training exercises. Although these exercises can be done in any position, it may be easiest to perform them when lying on your back with your knees bent and feet flat. Squeeze or tighten the pelvic muscles (as if you were stopping the flow of urine or the passage of gas) for 10 seconds. Then relax this muscle for 10 seconds. Repeat this process 25 times. Do a set of 25 contractions twice a day.

If you find that your muscles get tired doing 25, you can do a smaller number of contractions at a time. Try to work up to a total of 50 per day.

Try to use this muscle contraction technique to decrease the passage of urine when you cough or sneeze.

After a 6-8 week period you may cut down to 25 contractions daily to maintain the benefits you have gained (decreased episodes of urinary incontinence).

COMMON MISTAKES WHEN DOING KEGEL EXERCISES

It is important to do the exercises correctly; improper or poor form may make the incontinence worse. Common mistakes include contracting the stomach muscles, thigh muscles and muscles of the buttocks, or holding your breath. Focus on keeping your stomach, buttocks and thigh muscles relaxed. The muscle you want to work on is your pelvic muscle.

— Compiled by Barbara Resnick, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Nursing, Baltimore

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The purpose of this patient education handout is to further explain or remind you about a medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your health care provider. This handout may be reproduced for distribution to patients.

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