



**ST. MICHAEL'S
HOSPITAL**
Dún Laoghaire

Pelvic Floor Centre

How to protect your pelvic floor when coughing

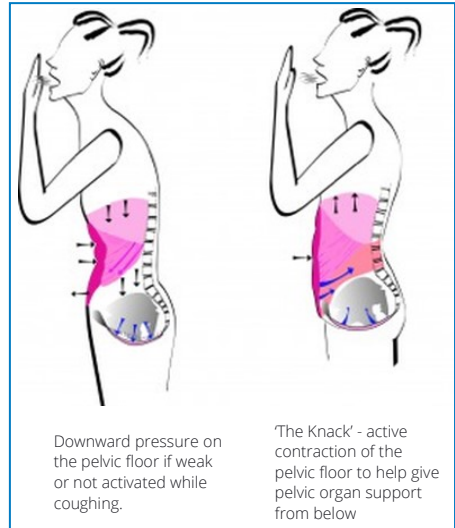


How to protect your pelvic floor if you have a cough

Activities, such as coughing or sneezing increase the intra-abdominal pressure, and therefore the downwards pressure on the pelvic floor.

Ongoing episodes of coughing may lead to an exacerbation of leakage of urine (stress incontinence), a feeling of heaviness in the vaginal passage (related to prolapse) or lack of control of wind from the back passage.

These may be particularly challenging for an already weakened pelvic floor. Many factors contribute to a weakened pelvic floor including childbirth, menopausal changes, ongoing heavy lifting and chronic straining to pass a bowel movement.



So how can we help to protect our pelvic floor and minimise symptoms with coughing?

The first challenge is to connect with your pelvic floor muscles and see if you can feel them working.

Sit in an upright position with your rib cage over your pelvis and the weight equal through both sit bones. Sit tall, but relaxed.

Breathe normally. Focus on the muscles connecting your back passage to your water passage.

Try to lift them internally from your tail bone to your water passage (near your pubic bone).

Hold 3 seconds as you breathe, then release. Repeat this action 10 times to get your muscles working.

Try not to squeeze your buttocks together or hold your breath.

Once you have identified this muscle group you can progress to do the following programme in the next section.

10 fast lifts

As described previously, quickly tighten your pelvic floor muscles and then release. This is to target your fast muscle fibres that will stop you from leaking when you cough). Repeat 10 times.

10 slow holds

This time gently lift your pelvic floor and aim to hold for 10 seconds, as you breathe, then release. This may be more difficult but this may eventually help support the pelvic organs and prevent vaginal prolapse.

Remember that you are trying to support the weight of the organs above with the pelvic floor below.

It is recommended to do 10 fast lifts and 10 slow lifts, 3 times a day to maintain pelvic floor control.

'The knack'

This is the most important technique for you to use if you are coughing. Pull up your pelvic floor just before you cough or sneeze. It is the timing of this contraction that is important.

This will help to support the neck of the bladder so that urine does not leak out under pressure and it will also help support to the other pelvic organs.

If controlling wind is your issue with coughing, try to tighten your back passage (as if you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind), before you cough.

All of these take practice but once mastered, should become an automatic reaction to help protect your pelvic floor with coughing or sneezing.

If you feel that you cannot control the downwards force, try to support your peroneal area with counter pressure from your hand or a small towel roll as you cough.

Repeated coughing can be very tiring, not very effective in clearing your chest and can put downwards strain on the pelvic floor.

If you have a chronic respiratory condition or have recently developed a cough, follow the Active Cycle of breathing technique that to effectively help to clear the chest.

Active Cycle of Breathing

The Active Cycle of Breathing aims to improve ventilation to the lungs, loosen and clear secretions in the lungs and improve the efficiency of a cough.

It can also help to relax the airways and reduce symptoms of wheezing, tightness and shortness of breath. Follow the steps outlined below-

1. Breathing Control

Sit in a relaxed position with your spine upright and supported. Place your hands on your tummy. Try to breathe in through your nose and feel your tummy 'rise and fall' as you slowly breathe in and out. Do not force the breath. Take your own time. Release your shoulders and front of the chest with each breath. Repeat 5-6 times.

2. Deep Breathing Exercises / Thoracic expansion

This time, place your hands on the sides of your rib cage. Breathe in through your nose and try to take a deeper breath, expanding the sides of the rib cage under your hands.

Keep your shoulders relaxed. At the end of your breath in, hold for 2-3 seconds, and then breathe out gently. Do not force your breath. Repeat 3-4 times.

3. Follow this again with your **Breathing control**, as above in 1.

4. Huff

A 'huff' helps move phlegm/ secretions from the smaller airways to the larger, central airways.

Open your mouth, take a normal breathe in and 'huff' as if you were trying to 'breathe on a mirror to clean it'. Do this 2-3 times or as many as is needed.

5. **Repeat** your cycle of Breathing Control again, as in 1.

6. Cough

This time when you cough, your breathing should be more in control and if there is any phlegm to clear, it should be higher up the airway, requiring less effort. Aim to do 1-2 strong, effective coughs.

Try to pull up your pelvic floor BEFORE you cough so that it is protected and giving support from below.

Use the above technique throughout your day to help with keeping your chest clear and pelvic floor protected.

SVHG document control

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