

PELVIC HEALTH

WOMEN & GIRLS HEALTH & WELFARE RUGBYSAFE TOOLKIT



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1. An introduction to pelvic health

What is pelvic health?

Pelvic health refers to the function and wellbeing of the pelvic floor muscles and associated organs (bladder, rectum, uterus).

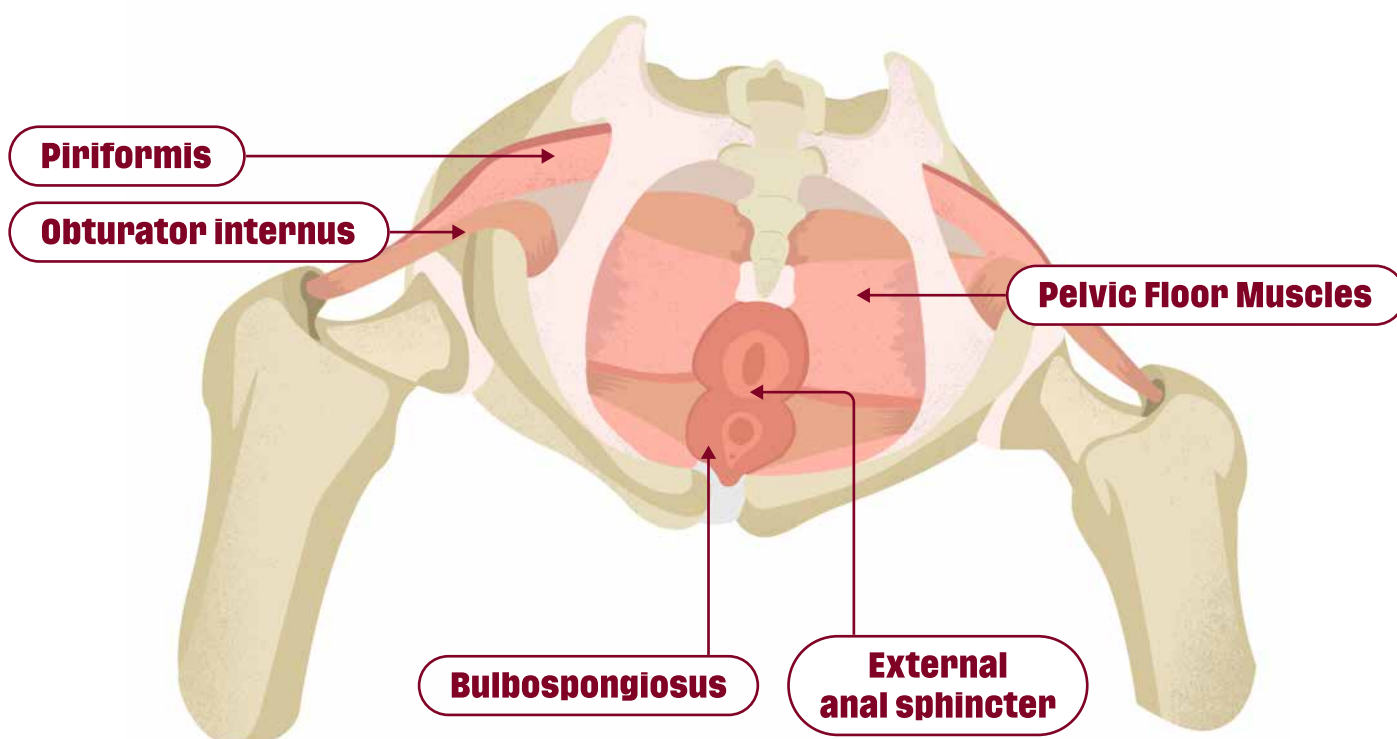
As we grow up and develop, the pelvic floor isn't a part of our body that we talk about. Yet it is an important muscle group for all women and can present signs and symptoms of dysfunction during strenuous contact sports such as rugby. That's why it's important that we understand what it is and how to train it.

What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor is made up of muscles and connective tissues that form a structural sling of support to the base of the pelvis. The pelvic floor muscles work to:

- **Support the pelvic organs**
- **Prevent leakage from the bladder or bowel**
- **Facilitate emptying of the bladder and bowel**
- **Support sexual function [1]**

As the image shows, it is surrounded by pelvic bones with a lot of complicated sounding names!



2. Pelvic floor dysfunction

What happens when pelvic floor muscles are not functioning?

When the pelvic floor muscles are not functioning as they should, it is referred to as pelvic floor dysfunction. Symptoms can occur such as:

- **Pain**
- **Pelvic organ prolapse**
- **Difficulties in control of the bladder or bowel.**

Pelvic floor dysfunction can occur at **anytime** throughout the female lifespan, including during puberty.

You may think that the pelvic floor is only important for those who have been pregnant? However, research shows that athletes who have never been pregnant or experienced childbirth can have issues with pelvic floor dysfunction, particularly symptoms associated with their sport [2].

Up to three quarters of athletes playing impact and exertional sports like rugby can experience issues such as leaking of urine. As the topic of pelvic health is seen as taboo or embarrassing and seldom talked about, the number of people experiencing symptoms may be higher.

Athletes often assume mistakenly that it is normal to leak [3].

What are the signs and symptoms of pelvic floor dysfunction?

If you are unsure if you have signs and symptoms of pelvic floor dysfunction, check out this screening tool. It will help you work out if you might benefit from support and symptom management (PFD Sentinel) [4].



INSTRUCTIONS

Check the box whether symptoms are reported and items are satisfied. Score 1 point for each one.

SYMPTOMS

Do you...

- Usually experience urine leakage?
- Usually experience urinary urgency and / or nocturia (a strong sensation or need to urinate frequently or regularly wake at least once in the night to urinate).
- Usually have a bulge or something falling out that you can see or feel in your vaginal area?
- Usually lose stool or gas beyond your control?
- Usually experience pain or discomfort in the lower abdomen or genital region?

SYMPTOM SCORE = /5

* Any of these symptoms may suggest that you have an issue with your pelvic floor. If you can tick anyone of the boxes you should consider seeking support and treatment. The symptom management tool can also be used to measure improvement before and after treatment.

... Pelvic floor dysfunction

How can pelvic floor dysfunction affect your participation in rugby?

Symptoms of pelvic floor dysfunction can affect your athletic performance and enjoyment of rugby. If you leak every time you make a tackle you may find there are certain situations within training and games which you choose to avoid, impacting your performance. If you have pelvic pain you may start guarding yourself which could change how you play the game.

Symptoms can also impact your self-esteem and confidence. You may start to avoid socialising with your teammates or friends. So, it is important to address any signs and symptoms if they happen or better still, prevent them from starting.



3. Pelvic health lifestyle and management strategies

What are the lifestyle and management strategies to achieve GOOD pelvic health?

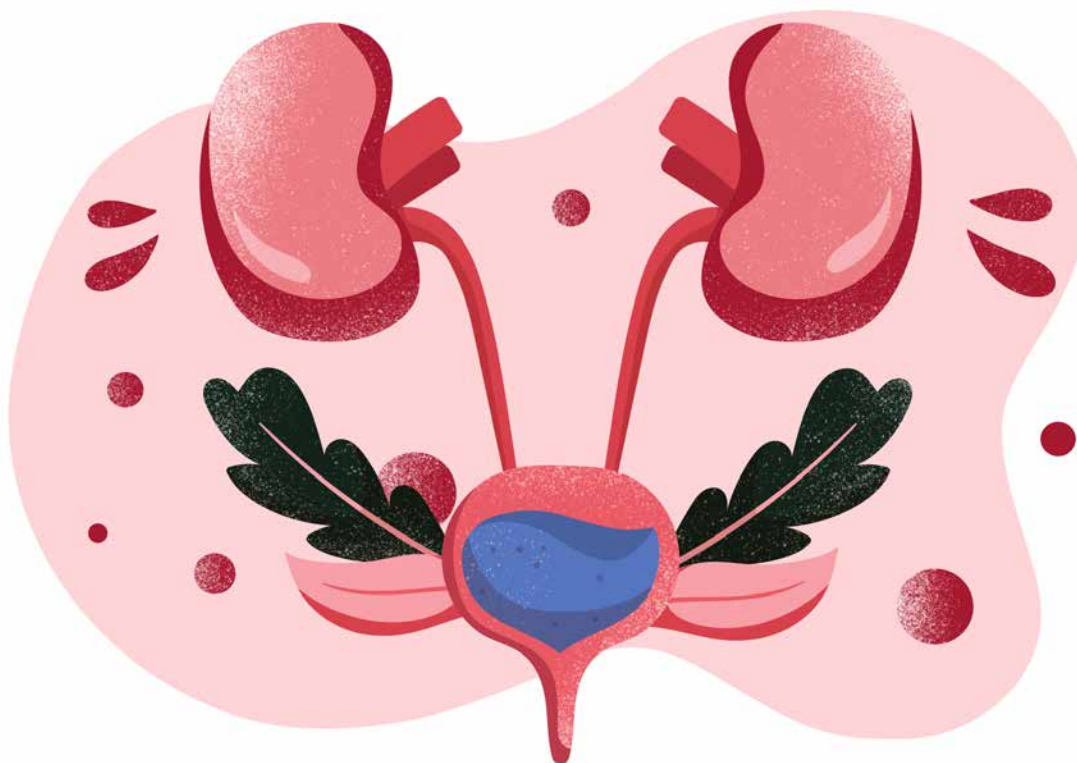
1. Speak up

Communicating is key! Talk to your coaches, teammates and friends. By talking about symptoms and having open conversations may give someone else struggling, the confidence to speak out too!

Remember that every pelvic floor journey is individual.

✓ **If you experience symptoms** of pelvic floor dysfunction - then speak up and seek out medical guidance such as a **Pelvic Health Physiotherapist**.

✗ **If you don't have symptoms** - maintain your pelvic floor strength and conditioning as it will help you to manage the demands on the pelvic floor during rugby training and games.



... Pelvic health lifestyle and management strategies

2. Develop healthy bladder habits

You may be one of those people that needs to go to the toilet ‘just in case’.

If so, try to delay that first urge as storing more urine can stop the bladder feeling ‘sensitive’ to small amounts. Try holding for 1-minute longer, 5-minutes etc and build up gradually. A healthy time period is every 2-3 hours.

Try and avoid “just in case” bladder trips; empty your bladder once before training or a game.

Do not restrict what you drink prior to training or a match in order to avoid leaking. It’s a natural behaviour but remember that concentrated urine is more irritable to the bladder.

3. Train your pelvic floor

The pelvic floor muscles can become dysfunctional when they are too weak, too tight or if they lack endurance or reaction speed. Like any other area of the body, they require focused training.

It can be difficult for people to understand how to locate or train their pelvic floor. Different cues will have different meanings and responses for different athletes.

You may want to think about the following when targeting your pelvic floor:

- **Imagine you are stopping gas from escaping**
- **Close your back passage**
- **Stop the flow of urine**
- **Imagine closing a zip from your back passage to your front passage**

You should not be clenching the muscles surrounding the pelvis or holding your breath while training your pelvic floor. Pelvic floor training can consist of:



3 to 4 times per week

Quick squeezes

- 1-2 sets
- 1 second
- 5-10 repetitions

Slow squeezes

- 3 sets
- 5-10 secs
- 10-12 repetitions

4. Pregnancy and postpartum

Some players will enter into motherhood while still engaging in Rugby. It is important to know that staying active during pregnancy, where safe to do so, is beneficial to your overall pregnancy and recovery. In the context of Rugby you will need to adapt contact elements of training while pregnant.

After having a baby it can be hard to know how best to return to training and playing rugby. No matter what your delivery experience was, it is important to take a period of relative rest and recovery after you give birth. You can commence pelvic floor muscle training in the early days and weeks and gradually increase your levels of walking and functional activity.

Between **4 and 6 weeks you may feel like you want to join training again**. If you have no postnatal complications and you are feeling good, you can do this by starting with elements of training that do not involve contact drills, high impact or significant exertion.

If you experience any symptoms when you are training, it is important to get assessed by an appropriate medically trained individual.

You can gradually increase the level of impact and exertion of training when you feel ready. Remember, pelvic floor muscle training should still feature as part of your training program even when you return to training. You want your pelvic floor muscles to be ready to tolerate all of the demands placed upon them by rugby.

Refer to the following infographic from Donnelly et al. 2021 [4] for more information to guide your return to rugby.



...Pregnancy and postpartum

Return-to-Sport Postpartum: the 6Rs Framework [5]

This framework is underpinned by a whole system, biopsychosocial approach that requires the safety of the mother and baby to be the overarching consideration.



5. Supporting female athletes

What can I do as a coach, physio or club volunteer to support my rugby athletes?

- Create an atmosphere where open communication with players can occur.
- If a player wants to have a conversation, find a quiet place to talk. Listen to them, don't feel pressured to fix them; by allowing them to share their experiences you will be showing support.
- Education is important, encourage the rugby athletes you support to take a look at this guide, it may promote more open discussions within your group!
- Take a look at your club's toilet facilities, are they suitable and well stocked?



6. Additional resources

Want to find out more?

If you are looking to find out more about your pelvic floor and pelvic health, or how to train your pelvic floor muscles, then check out the following key resources:

You can find out more information on health and wellbeing during and after pregnancy via the following organisations:

[POGP \(Pelvic Obstetric & Gynaecological Physiotherapy - www.thepogp.co.uk\)](http://www.thepogp.co.uk)

[The Active Pregnancy Foundation https://www.activepregnancyfoundation.org/](https://www.activepregnancyfoundation.org/)

<https://squeezezyapp.com/>

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