

THE LITTLE MUSCLES THAT COULD

The Mysterious Pelvic Muscles You Should Be Exercising

By Andrew Siegel, MD

There are over 600 muscles in the human body and they all are there for good reasons. However, some are more critical to health and survival than others. In the class rank it is a no-brainer that the heart muscle is valedictorian, followed by the diaphragm. What may surprise you is that the pelvic floor muscles (a.k.a. Kegel muscles) rank in the top ten of the hierarchy.

The pelvic floor muscle group is a muscular hammock that makes up the floor of the “core” muscles. They are located in the nether regions and form the bottom of the pelvis. They are among the most versatile muscles in the body, equally essential in both women and men for the support of the pelvic organs, bladder and bowel control and sexual function. Unfortunately, because they are out of sight, they are frequently out of mind and often not considered when it comes to exercise and fitness. However, without functional pelvic muscles, our pelvic organs would dangle and we would be diapered and asexual.

Our bodies are comprised of a variety of muscle types: There are the glamour, for show, mirror-appeal, overt, seen and be witnessed muscles that offer no secrets—“what you see is what you get”—the biceps, triceps, pectorals, latissimus, quadriceps, etc. Then there are muscles including the pelvic floor muscles that are shrouded in secrecy, hidden from view, concealed and covert, unseen and behind the scenes, unrecognized and misunderstood, favoring function over form. “Go” rather than “show.” Most of us can probably point out our “bi’s” (biceps), “tri’s” (triceps), “quads” (quadriceps), “peccs” (pectorals), etc., but who really knows where their “pelvs” (pelvic floor muscles) are located? For that matter, who even knows what they are and how they contribute to pelvic health?

Strong puritanical cultural roots influence our thoughts and feelings about our nether regions. Consequently, this area of our body—the “saddle” region (the part of the body in contact with a bicycle seat)—often fails to attain the respect and attention that other zones of our bodies command. Cloaking increases mystique, and so it is for these pelvic muscles, not only obscured by clothing, but also residing in that most curious of regions—an area concealed from view even when we are unclothed. Furthermore, the mystique is contributed to by the mysterious powers of the pelvic floor muscles, which straddle the gamut of being critical for what

may be considered the most pleasurable and refined of human pursuits—sex—but equally integral to what may be considered the basest of human activities—bowel and bladder function. The deep pelvic floor muscles span from the pubic bone in front to the tailbone in the back, and from pelvic sidewall to pelvic sidewall, between the “sit” bones. The superficial pelvic floor muscles are situated under the surface of the external genitals and anus. The pelvic floor muscles are classified as stabilizers and compressors rather than movers (joint movement and locomotion), which is the more typical role that skeletal muscles such as these play. Stabilizers support the pelvic organs, keeping them in proper position. Compressors act as sphincters—enveloping the urinary, gynecological and intestinal tracts, opening and closing to provide valve-like control. The superficial pelvic floor muscles act to compress the deep roots of the genitals, trapping blood within these structures and preparing the male and female sexual organs for sexual intercourse; additionally, they contract rhythmically at the time of sexual climax. Although the pelvic floor muscles are not muscles of glamour, they are certainly muscles of “amour”! Pelvic floor muscle “dysfunction” is a common condition referring to when the pelvic floor muscles are not functioning properly. It affects both women and men and can seriously impact the quality of one’s life. The condition can range from “low tone” to “high tone.”

Low tone occurs when the pelvic muscles lack in strength and endurance and is often associated with stress urinary incontinence (urinary leakage with coughing, sneezing, laughing, exercising and other physical activities); pelvic organ prolapse (when one or more of the female pelvic organs falls into the space of the vagina and at times outside the vagina); and altered sexual function, e.g., erectile dysfunction or vaginal looseness. High tone occurs when the pelvic floor muscles are over-tensioned and unable to relax, giving rise to a pain syndrome known as pelvic floor tension myalgia. A first-line means of dealing with pelvic floor dysfunction is getting these muscles in tip-top shape. Tapping into and harnessing their energy can help optimize pelvic, sexual and urinary health in both genders. Like other skeletal muscles, the pelvic

muscles are capable of making adaptive changes when targeted exercise is applied to them. Pelvic floor training involves gaining facility with both the contracting and the relaxing phases of pelvic muscle function. Their structure and function can be enhanced, resulting in broader, thicker and firmer muscles and the ability to generate a powerful contraction at will—necessary for pelvic wellbeing. Pelvic floor muscle training can be effective in stabilizing, improving and even preventing issues with pelvic support, sexual function, and urinary and bowel control. Pursuing pelvic floor muscle training before pregnancy will make carrying the pregnancy easier and will facilitate labor and delivery; it will also allow for the effortless resumption of the exercises in the post-partum period in order to re-tone the vagina, as the exercises were learned under ideal circumstances, prior

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to childbirth. Similarly, engaging in pelvic training before prostate cancer surgery will facilitate the resumption of urinary control and sexual function after surgery. Based upon solid exercise science, pelvic floor muscle training can help maintain pelvic integrity and optimal function well into old age. Bottom Line: Although concealed from view, the pelvic floor muscles are extremely important muscles that deserve serious respect. These muscles are responsible for powerful and vital functions that can be significantly improved/enhanced when intensified by training. It is never too late to begin pelvic floor muscle training exercises—so start now to optimize your pelvic, sexual, urinary, and bowel health.

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