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BWY SPECIAL FEATURE

Pelvic Power



8 POSES TO STRENGTHEN YOUR PELVIC FLOOR & CORE

Words: Wendy Teasdill

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Wendy Teasdill has been practicing Yoga since the late seventies. She has studied in Pune, India, with Mr Iyengar and his family since 1989, and their influence underpins her practice to this day. Wendy is a Yoga Teacher Trainer and CPD Tutor for the British Wheel of Yoga. Wendy runs several distance learning courses specifically on the pelvic floor: www.bwy.org.uk or visit: <https://wendyteasdill.com>

Have you ever taken part in a yoga class, gone for a run or completed a workout and felt a little bit of pee come out? If so, it may be down to having a weak pelvic floor.

Bladder weakness can affect both women and men, but it is more common for women following childbirth and through periods of hormonal change. However, men can also suffer from it too, as it weakens with age and can be brought under significant stress from high-impact activities and through poor diet and lifestyle.

Despite bladder weakness affecting some **14 million people in the UK**, many people don't know where the pelvic floor is or how to strengthen it.

THE PELVIC FLOOR

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles, ligaments, and tissues that form a supportive hammock-like structure or diaphragm at the bottom

of the pelvis. Shaped like a basket, it supports the pelvic organs: the bladder, uterus and rectum, helping to maintain their position and prevent them from descending or prolapsing.

As well as maintaining urinary continence, strong pelvic floor muscles are essential for providing stability and support to the pelvis, spine and hips, and work together with the core muscles to maintain good posture and body alignment. They are also essential for sexual health and function.

Pregnant women are far more likely to know of its existence as they are prone to 'frequency of micturition' or the need to pee more. Progesterone – the hormone which helps maintain the pregnancy - also softens all the smooth muscles of the body – including the bladder. When the baby's head moves down in the pelvis at the end of the third trimester, frequent trips to the loo can become the norm!

And then there's the birth process, which places tremendous stress on the pelvic floor muscles; if the second, or 'pushing' stage is protracted, or



there's intervention such as forceps or ventouse, the pelvic floor will be very sensitive post-partum. Even if the birth is straightforward, the postnatal pelvic floor is never the same: the nerve endings in the pubococcygeal muscle - which are designed to rebound after birth - can be affected, and may require a certain amount of re-training.

Problems such as urinary and faecal incontinence, flatulence and prolapse - where the womb/bladder and/or the

rectum descend - can cause a range of discomforts that you may feel too embarrassing to discuss with anyone.

Men as well as women who haven't had babies are not immune to pelvic floor dysfunction. A poor diet can cause constipation due to the stress put on the pelvic floor through constant straining, and the hormonal changes of menopause cause oestrogen levels to decline, which increases slackness and the possibility of prolapse.



HOW TO STRENGTHEN YOUR PELVIC FLOOR

The good news is there are exercises that can help. When we work the muscles of the pelvic floor we augment the blood flow to the region and develop strength, flexibility and familiarity. Here are the best yoga exercises to help strengthen your pelvic floor.

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Wendy Teasdill

1 Mula Bandha or root lock
Mula Bandha, or 'root-lock' reverses the flow of energy by drawing the pelvic floor muscles in and up. This increases inner strength.

The practice can be done whilst sitting or integrated within your asana practice. It involves drawing the muscles linking the tailbone to the pubic bone inwards and upwards on an exhalation, and relaxing them on the inhalation. The relaxation is as important as the engagement, as this lends flexibility. When we draw the main muscles inwards and upwards we cause an upward cascade, in which the sphincter muscles of the anus, vagina and urethra follow suit, causing the inner muscles of the pelvis to lift.



2



Adho Mukha Svanasana or Downward-facing dog

Inverted poses take the pressure off the pelvic floor and encourage increased blood flow to the pelvic region. The pose actively engages the core muscles which can help engage the pelvic floor as part of the overall core activation.

- Come to all fours with the hands slightly ahead of the shoulders, knees under your hips.
- Tuck your toes under and, on the exhalation, press the underside of the toes firmly into the mat, lift your knees and draw the pelvis back from the shoulders, shoulders from the hands. Allow the legs to bend or straighten according to the spine. Press your palms firmly into the ground and actively push through your hands, creating space and length in your upper body.
- We borrow from the legs to give to the spine. With each exhalation, engage the pelvic floor and the core muscles. Maintain the engagement of your pelvic floor muscles as you continue to breathe deeply and evenly.
- Hold the pose for a few breaths, focusing on the engagement of your core and pelvic floor.
- To release, gently bend your knees and lower them back down to the ground, returning to the starting position on your hands and knees.



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3

Dvi Pada Pitham or Bridge

This pose helps engage the pelvic floor muscles by lifting and stabilising the hips. This activation helps to strengthen the pelvic floor and improve its overall tone.

- Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet hip-distance apart, flat on the ground. Your arms should be resting alongside your body, palms facing down.
- As you exhale, press your feet into the mat and lift your hips off the ground, gradually rolling up your spine.
- Engage your glutes, inner thighs, and pelvic floor muscles as you lift your hips higher. With each exhalation, press the soles of the feet evenly and firmly into the mat and feel the rebound up from the earth feeding the pelvic floor strength. Keep your thighs parallel to each other and your knees directly over your ankles. (Hot tip: place a small Pilates ball between the knees to amplify the sensation of the inner thighs and gets the pelvic floor muscles working.)
- Hold the pose for a few breaths, maintaining the engagement of your pelvic floor muscles.
- Slowly lower your hips back down to the ground, articulating your spine one vertebra at a time.





4 Utkatanasana or Chair

As you squat into the pose, the pelvic floor muscles activate to provide stability and support to the pelvis.

- Stand tall with your feet hip-width apart and arms relaxed at your sides.
- Inhale deeply, then exhale as you slowly bend your knees, as if sitting back into an imaginary chair. Keep your spine lengthened and your chest lifted.
- Extend your arms forward, parallel to the ground, or bring your palms together at your heart centre.
- Raise your toes to check that the pelvis isn't coming too far forwards and overloading the knees. Return the toes to the mat, press the base of the big toes down with each exhalation, feeling the upward cascade. (Again, hold a Pilates ball between the knees to intensify the sensation).
- Engage your core muscles, including the pelvic floor, to stabilise your body and support the pose.
- Hold the pose for several breaths, maintaining the engagement of your core and pelvic floor.

5 Vrksasana or Tree

Maintaining balance in tree pose challenges the pelvic floor muscles, as they help provide stability and control. Active engagement of the deep abdominal muscles helps stabilise the pelvis and strengthens the pelvic floor.

- Stand tall with your feet hip-width apart and arms relaxed at your sides.
- Shift your weight onto your left foot and find your balance.
- Lift your right foot off the ground, externally rotate the right hip and place the sole of the right foot against your left inner thigh (or calf – but not the knee).
- Find a focal point to gaze at, which helps with balance.
- Engage your core muscles, including the pelvic floor, to stabilise your body.
- Lengthen your spine, relax your shoulders, and breathe deeply.
- Take your arms into a position that encourages the breath to mould the pose for several breaths, maintaining the engagement of your core and pelvic floor.
- Release the pose by gently lowering your right foot to the ground and returning to a standing position.
- Repeat the pose on the other side, switching the placement of your feet.

Diastasis Recti

For postnatal women, simply working the pelvic floor muscles isn't enough. During pregnancy, it is not uncommon for the two main vertical muscles running down the front of the abdomen to split, due to the pressure of the baby. This is known as 'diastasis recti' – or 'split abs.'

The two muscles are attached to a central aponeurosis – a sheath of connective tissue comprising resilient bundles of connective tissues. If the connective tissue separates, the baby will have more room to expand, and, postnatally, the abs usually do come



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back together of their own accord. However, if the separation has been particularly stringent it could take years for the muscles to come back together.

6

DIY Rec-check

- Lie on your back with the knees bent, and feet in line with hips.
- place a thumb in the abdominal mid-line and two fingers above the navel.
- Gently lift your head off the floor. This activates the abdominals.
- If there is no resistance under the thumb, there may well be some separation.



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7

Curl ups

- Lie on your back with the knees bent, and feet in line with hips.
- Cross your arms and place your hand on the opposite sides of the abdomen.
- On an exhalation - simultaneously raise the head, look between the knees, and pull the two sides of the abdomen towards the centre.
- Repeat x 6.

8

Mula Bandha

Working the abs without using *Mula Bandha* (see No 1) could split the abdominals further and weaken the pelvic floor. It is recommended to repeat *Mula Bandha* ten times, three times a day.

