INNER STRENGTH

Your pelvic floor plays a key role in so many activities: exercising, having sex, delivering a baby, breathing.

Why are so few people talking about it?

by LAURA BRZYSKI
When local pelvic-floor yoga therapist Debbie Brownstein first became aware of her own pelvic floor, she was 30 years old.

One year after having her first child, she was growing to the live sounds of the Disco Biscuits with friends. One of them had brought ambient tranquility to the concert ("makes mental notes to go to a concert with Brownstein and her friends"); but when it was Brownstein's turn to jump, something unexpected happened. "Three jumps in, I peed myself—I had never happened to me before," she says.

Brownstein called her midwife, who told her that urinary incontinence—the inability to control bladder function—"just happens after you have a child" and to "soothe Kegels," because her pelvic floor was likely weakened from pregnancy and delivery.

"I was so frustrated," Brownstein says, "I kept wondering why nobody at this point in my life had told me what a pelvic floor is or what can happen to the muscles due to trauma. For the first time, I felt blessed to be with a specialist not only to rehabilitate my pelvic floor, but to process all the emotions that arose over what I had become so basic about my own anatomy."

That was 2009. Nearly two decades later, public conversations and awareness about pelvic health—while improved—"are still minimal. As a result, folks either don’t pay their pelvic floors any mind (how can you support something you’re completely unaware of?) or suffer in silence because they believe their dysfunction is ‘normal.’" The problems extend beyond those who’ve given birth. The first time I came across the term ‘pelvic floor’ was in 2017, when Girls star Zoë Marnet announced she finally had an answer for her frequent bathroom-going and pain with sex after years of misdiagnoses and dismissals. She, like me, hadn’t even heard of a pelvic floor before. Unfortunately, Marnet, like many others, didn’t find out what it was until dysfunction set in. And therein lies the issue. Many people don’t even know they could have a problem until it becomes an actual problem—at which point they’re left scratching their heads or furiously WebMD-ing.

**Whether or not you’ve experienced dysfunction, nobody with a pelvic floor—and yes, everyone has one—deserves to be in the dark about one of the body’s most crucial parts. The pelvic floor is the group of muscles, ligaments and connective tissue that spans the bottom of your pelvis and holds all the pelvic organs—including the bladder, vagina, cervix, uterus, rectum and prostate—in place, like a sling or a hammock. It works with the hips and muscles to stabilize your body, is embedded with circular muscles called sphincters that help control things going in and out of your body, aids in sexual arousal, and provides a kind of safety or protection mechanism when you’re experiencing fear, anxiety or stress," says Nicole Degan, a certified woman’s clinical specialist at Jefferson Rehabilitation.

That means when your pelvic floor isn’t functioning correctly, it’s a big deal. You might lose proper bladder or bowel function, experience pain from the hips down, or stop enjoying sex—all of which can negatively impact your self-esteem and confidence, especially in social or intimate settings. It also means that everyone, whether or not you’ve had a problem, should be actively taking steps toward preventive maintenance of the pelvic floor. This floor, like all other muscles, benefits from a solid workout every so often.

Pelvic-floor dysfunction occurs because of muscle hypertonicity (high levels of tension) or hypermobility (low levels of tension), or an inability to contract or relax your pelvic-floor muscles. Alexis Dispensa, a physical therapist and former assistant clinical director at Excel Physical Therapy Society Hill, says the degree of muscle integrity can be affected by trauma—physical, emotional or sexual—or everyday behaviors that directly impact the pelvic floor. "My approach to pelvic health is inspired by postural restoration, which acknowledges that the anatomy is asymmetrical," she says. "Regular activities, like the way we sit, sleep, breathe or hold in our bellies, require the pelvic floor to compensate for asymmetries.

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"Breathing deeply from your low belly creates a nice stretch of those muscles. It also activates your parasympathetic nervous system, which is your body's rest and relaxation response." That also means cardiovascular exercise, like jogging, swimming and rowing, is great for your heart, lungs and pelvis. It's important to adding in some quiet time or meditation throughout your day will help you calm your mind and relieve tension.

Sheth recommends monitoring the amount of heavy lifting you do, because that adds additional stress and strain on those muscles. If you're heavy-lifting or working on a farm and doing physical labor, it's important to add some form of relaxation to your routine. "You might want to consider a massage or a warm bath if you're experiencing pain or discomfort." 

"The pelvic floor is really the key to being able to breathe," says Sheth. "It's a part of your body that helps to control your breathing and your core muscles. It's important to take care of your pelvic floor muscles so that you can continue to breathe and move around comfortably." 

A woman's pelvic floor is designed to support the organs in the pelvic area, including the bladder, intestines, uterus and rectum. If the muscles become weak or damaged, it can lead to urinary incontinence, organ prolapse, pelvic organ dysfunction and other problems. 

"The pelvic floor muscles are important for a variety of reasons," says Sheth. "They help to support the organs in the pelvic area, they help with bladder control and they help with sexual function. If you have weak pelvic floor muscles, you might experience symptoms like urinary incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse, or difficulty with sexual function." 

"It's important to take care of your pelvic floor muscles," says Sheth. "You can do this by contracting the muscles, like you would when you want to stop the flow of urine. You can also do Kegel exercises to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles." 

Kegel exercises are a type of pelvic floor muscle exercise that can be done anywhere, anytime. To do a Kegel exercise, you simply contract the muscles in your pelvic floor, as if you were trying to stop the flow of urine. You can do this exercise anywhere, anytime, and it can be done without anyone knowing. 

"It's important to do Kegel exercises regularly," says Sheth. "You can do them anywhere, anytime, and it doesn't take a lot of time. You can do them while you're sitting at your desk, while you're driving, or while you're brushing your teeth. It's a simple and effective way to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles." 

"The more you do Kegel exercises, the stronger your pelvic floor muscles will become," says Sheth. "And the stronger your pelvic floor muscles, the better you'll be able to control your bladder and your bowels. If you have a weak pelvic floor, you might need to do more Kegel exercises to strengthen your muscles."