

# Kegal Exercises

## What are Kegels?

Kegels are exercises you can do to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles — that is, the muscles that support your urethra, bladder, uterus, and rectum. The exercises are named after Arnold Kegel, a gynecologist who recommended them back in the 1940s to help women with urinary incontinence, or diminished bladder control, which can happen after childbirth.

If you're not already doing Kegel exercises, start them now and make them a lifelong habit. Strengthening your pelvic floor muscles helps prevent urinary stress incontinence, a problem that affects up to 70 percent of women at some point during or after pregnancy. There's even some evidence suggesting that strong pelvic floor muscles may help shorten the pushing stage of labor.

Kegels also improve circulation to your rectal and vaginal area, helping to keep hemorrhoids at bay and speeding healing after an episiotomy or tear during childbirth. Finally, continuing to do Kegel exercises regularly after giving birth not only helps you maintain bladder control, but also improves muscle tone in your vagina, making postpartum sex more enjoyable.

## How do I do them?

Imagine that you're trying to stop yourself from passing gas and trying to stop the flow of urine midstream at the same time. The feeling is one of "squeeze and lift" — a closing and drawing up of the front and back passages. (Hint: Insert a clean finger into your vagina before doing a Kegel. If you feel pressure around your finger, you're on the right track.)

Make sure that you're squeezing and lifting without pulling in your tummy, squeezing your legs together, tightening your buttocks, or holding your breath. In other words, only your pelvic floor muscles should be working. Though you may have trouble using these muscles in isolation at first, it gets easier with practice. It might help to place a hand on your belly while you're doing your Kegels to make sure that it stays relaxed.

Hold each Kegel for eight to ten seconds before releasing, and relax for a few seconds after each one. If you're suffering from urinary incontinence, try to hold a Kegel while you sneeze or cough. You may find that it helps keep you from leaking.

## How often should I do them?

Start doing Kegels a few at a time throughout the day. As your muscles start to feel stronger, gradually increase both the number of Kegels you do each day and the length of time you hold each contraction. Do them in sets of ten and try to work up to three or four sets about three times a day.

Make Kegels part of your daily routine: For example, you could do a series when you wake up in the morning, while you're watching TV, while breastfeeding, while waiting at a red light, or before you go to bed. But it really doesn't matter when or where you do them — as long as you do them regularly.

## Why Should I do Kegals?

- Conditioned muscles will make birth easier, and you will be less likely to tear or need an episiotomy
- Sexual enjoyment is enhanced for both partners
- Prevention of prolapse of pelvic organs
- Prevention of leaking urine with coughing, sneezing, or laughing

\*If you are doing kegal exercises regularly and you feel your bladder control is worsening or not improving, please see your midwife regarding additional testing that may be necessary.