

REGAINING CONTINENCE

Kegel Exercises for the Post-Prostatectomy Patient

Exercises for the pelvic floor muscles.

Kegel exercises are a set of special exercises designed to help you to control urine flow after a radical prostatectomy. It is normally recommended that men start Kegel exercises immediately after catheter removal; they should not be carried out while the catheter is in.

Many men find that by the use of these exercises they are able to regain continence more quickly after removal of their catheter. There is also personal case experience to suggest that there may be value in doing Kegel exercises prior to surgery. However, we wish to emphasize that such a suggestion is unsupported by research or documented evidence at this time, and that patients should consult with their physician prior to starting Kegel exercises in order to ensure that this will be safer for them.

During a radical prostatectomy, the internal sphincter muscle at the neck of the bladder is damaged and in some cases destroyed. In the normal male, it is this sphincter muscle which does the lion's share of controlling urine flow, any loss of sphincter function may prevent the bladder neck from closing fully. This results in some degree of incontinence.

However, men also have a second external sphincter adjacent to the bottom of the prostate. In time, this

sphincter can take over some of the control that is lost, when the internal sphincter is damaged but it is not strong enough to do the job alone.

Thus, it becomes very important to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles, which, by supporting the bladder and preventing it from sagging, can help to keep it fully closed. Improving the muscle tone of the pelvic floor muscles can be of great help in regaining continence following a radical prostatectomy.

Doing the so-called Kegel exercises (often known as Kegel for short) is an easy, convenient, and almost effortless way to gain this valuable pelvic floor muscle tone. called Kegel exercises (often known as Kegel for short) is an easy, convenient, and almost effortless way to gain this valuable pelvic floor muscle tone.

Kegel exercises are fast. Each exercise takes only moments of your time.

Kegel exercises are easy. Actually there is no need to learn anything new. You've known how to do the basic Kegel from the time you were potty trained as a toddler. You just didn't know that you knew!

Kegel exercises are almost effortless. If done correctly, your pulse and breathing remain normal and your body will be relaxed.

Kegel exercises are convenient. You can do Kegels while lying down, sitting, standing, watching TV or a ball game, working at a desk, or while walking slowly. In fact you can do them at any time except when you're engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity.

Kegel exercises are completely invisible to others. Nobody, even someone sitting squashed next to you on a narrow bench or in a subway car, can possibly tell if you are doing Kegel exercises right at that moment.

How do you identify the pelvic floor muscles? The pelvic floor muscles are the muscles you would squeeze shut to stop urinating in mid-stream, or to hold back an inopportune bowel evacuation. So, as we said before, you already know the basic Kegel movement.

How do you do Kegel exercises? The exercise protocol that follows is the one recommended at the Pelvic Floor Training Unit of the Incontinence Clinic at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. There are other Kegel exercise protocols. However, this one appears to work well for incontinence following radical prostatectomy. The protocol is divided into two parts: a set of "long" exercises and then a set of "short" exercises.

You should be able to start Kegel exercises as soon as your catheter is removed.

How Are Kegels Done?

- **Squeeze your pelvic floor muscle shut as tightly as you can and hold them shut for as long as your can (up to a maximum of 10 seconds.)**
- **Don't hold for more than 10 seconds. Longer is not better.**
- **Relax completely for 10 seconds (not less.)**
- **Repeat this cycle 15 times**

You have now completed one complete set of the long exercise, and that is all there is to it!

When you first begin to do Kegels you may find that you can't hold a contraction for more than a second or two, or you can't keep it tight because the muscles just don't have enough tone.

Don't be discouraged and don't worry. This is typical. As you practice daily, your muscles will gradually develop more strength. Eventually, after some weeks or months of conscientious practice, you will be able to hold the pelvic floor muscles squeezed tightly for a full 10 seconds with ease.

You should repeat the long exercise cycle – squeezing tightly for up to 10 seconds and relaxing completely for 10 seconds – for as many cycles as you can (up to 15 cycles) while doing them properly and with good form.

If you find that your muscles are becoming fatigued, and you just can't hold them tight, then stop. You've done enough exercises for that session. It is better to do fewer cycles, each with good form and

tight control, than it is to do more cycles with poor form and weak control. Eventually you want to work your way up to doing 15 good cycles per exercise session (or about 5 minutes in total), but this will probably take you some weeks or even several months to achieve. Don't get discouraged. Keep doing the exercise!

After you have completed as many cycles of long exercises as you can manage, relax for an additional 30 seconds. Then start on the "quick" exercises. Here are the instructions:

- **Squeeze and hold for one second.**
- **Relax completely for one second.**
- **Repeat this 5 times for a total of ten seconds.**
- **Relax completely for ten seconds.**
- **Repeat this entire cycle four or five times.**

A complete set of the "quick" exercises should take you about 2 minutes. Therefore, an entire Kegel exercise session – 15 long-type cycles followed by four or five quick-type cycles will take about 8 minutes.

How often should you do the exercises? You should try to do the complete exercise session 3-4 times every day. Try to set up a regular schedule, but don't worry if you miss a session from time to time. The benefit is cumulative, so at worst you'll eventually become dry a day or so later that you might have done if you'd been able to stay strictly on schedule.

What can happen if you do the exercises wrong? You won't

cause any harm if you do them incorrectly. You should make absolutely sure that you are doing the Kegel exercises correctly by consulting with your physician or the nursing staff at the Urology Clinic.

When can you start doing Kegel exercises? Unless your urologist recommends otherwise, you should be able to start Kegel exercises as soon as your catheter has been removed – but not before. During the following week or two, while you are still healing you may feel a little tenderness, for just a few minutes, in the genital region.

When can you stop doing the exercises? Once you have regained complete continence or you appear to have reached a permanent plateau of control, you can ease back on the frequency of exercise. However you should not stop completely. Rather you should gradually decrease the frequency of exercise. – from twice a day to once a day, then if no control is lost, to twice or once a week. By continuing the Kegel exercises once a week, you help to ensure good muscle tone.

Kegel exercises prior to surgery: It is widely recognized that healthy individuals will recover more quickly from surgery than unhealthy individuals. There is thus some logic to the idea that if your pelvic floor muscles are strong and have good tone before radical prostatectomy, you may be able to recover continence faster after surgery.

Patients who wish to consider initiating Kegel exercise prior to surgery are advised to discuss this with their urologist before they begin.