

# Why Having the Awkward Conversation About Your Pelvic Floor Health is *Worth it!*

BY STEPHANIE BOUCHARD

**A**s we age, most of us expect to suffer some level of urinary incontinence. That's just what happens when we get old: The muscles of the pelvic floor weaken, we start leaking, and we have to just live with it, right? Well, no. We don't necessarily have to resign ourselves to wearing adult diapers in our older years. Pelvic floor therapy to the rescue!

But first things first: If you're a guy or assigned male at birth, don't think pelvic floor health doesn't apply to you. Pelvic floor health is for every body. That's because everyone has a pelvic floor.

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles at the base of your torso. These muscles support your body's core and are home base to your bladder and bowel, and the uterus or prostate.

The pelvic floor muscles do a lot of work for us without our being aware of it, says

Lindsey McAdam, a Bangor area physical therapist and owner of Thrive Pelvic Physical Therapy.

"The pelvic floor plays an important role in what I call the pressure management system of the body," she says.

Activities such as running, jumping,

coughing, and sneezing increase pressure in the abdomen, and if there's pelvic floor dysfunction, people can experience symptoms such as urinary or fecal incontinence.

Incontinence is not the only symptom of pelvic floor disorders, and age is not the only factor leading to trouble with the pelvic floor, she says. Trauma or injury to the pelvis, surgery (prostate removal and hysterectomy, for example), obesity, high-impact exercising, childbirth, and menopause can cause pelvic floor disorders.

Organ prolapse, lower back pain, constipation, painful intercourse, reduced sexual arousal, infrequent orgasm, erectile dysfunction, inability to fully empty the bladder, and feeling a frequent need to pee are some of the symptoms of pelvic floor disorders.

Many people equate Kegel exercises with "fixing" pelvic floor troubles, and while those are terrific for strengthening pelvic floor weakness, they are not appropriate for every situation, says Teri Carr, a physical therapist at Pouzol Physical Therapy in Bangor who specializes in pelvic floor rehabilitation.

"Everybody assumes that the only thing you do for the pelvic floor is Kegels (but) that's a small piece of the big equation," she says. For people with overactive or tight pelvic muscles, for example, Kegels could worsen symptoms. Instead of doing Kegels, they might be better served with yoga stretches, learning relaxation techniques, or seeing a physical therapist for pelvic floor release treatment.

Before beginning any pelvic floor exercises or therapy, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor or a physical therapist who specializes in pelvic floor

therapy to assess what symptoms you're experiencing, say Carr and McAdam, so you can tailor a therapeutic plan to meet your needs.

Often people are reluctant or embarrassed to discuss their symptoms, even with their physician, but it's worth pushing through that discomfort, Carr and McAdam say.

"It's a personal and intimate area so when there is an issue, it typically affects multiple aspects of that person's life," says McAdam.

In particular, people with fecal or urinary incontinence may not want to go out or socialize with friends and family. They may stop doing things they love doing because they're afraid they'll leak poop or urine, says Carr. "It can be really limiting for people in their community involvement or just their social enjoyment."

"Knowing that there is help out there for you is important," says McAdam, "because (pelvic health) plays such a big role in your quality of life."

For more information on pelvic floor health, including tips and movement videos, go to the National Association for Continence's Pelvic Floor Health Center at [nafc.org/pelvic-floor-health-center](http://nafc.org/pelvic-floor-health-center).

