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Ten Things That I Wish I Had Known About The Pelvic Floor And How To Protect It

1. **Everyone is at risk for pelvic floor dysfunction (pfd), men and women of all ages whether they have been pregnant or not.**

The internet is ripe with definitions for pfd, but it's hard to find one that is comprehensive. In a nutshell, pfd is when the muscles of the pelvic floor are overly active, weak or non-responsive, not coordinated with the diaphragm and transverses abdominus, or impaired in some way.



2. **Symptoms of pelvic floor dysfunction (pfd)**

Pelvic pressure, vaginal pressure, incontinence/leakage, erectile dysfunction, bladder disorders, discomfort during intercourse, pelvic organ prolapse (uterus, bladder or rectum has moved), tailbone pain, low back pain, hernias, cystitis (bladder infection), painful urination, pelvic floor spasms, frequent need to urinate (or the feeling of), constipation/trouble with bowel movements.



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****If you experience any of these symptoms, go see a pelvic floor physiotherapist (they are covered by most insurance) and get a diagnosis!!!!** Thank you Health Club Wellness Clinic for the pic!

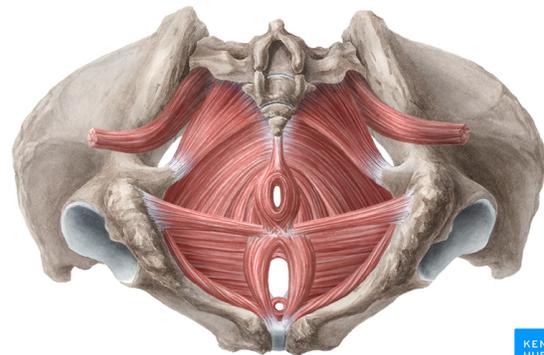
3. Risk factors for pfd

Breath holding, sucking in the belly, over-developed abdominal muscles, poor alignment of the spine and hips, pelvic tilts, history of athletics, genetics, hip surgery, sitting, bearing down in childbirth or elimination practices, high BMI, forceps-assisted birth, premature return to exercise after birth, poor alignment and movement patterns during pregnancy, menopause, malnutrition, gymnastics, running, cycling, horse-back riding, sexual abuse, breastfeeding, pelvic trauma, powerlifting, cheerleading, dancing, singing....the list goes on because really **any repetitive movement done for years with suboptimal alignment and breathing can cause problems for your pelvic floor.**

4. What is the pelvic floor anyways?

Your pelvic floor is part of your core. If you think of your core as a canister, the top is the diaphragm, the sides are the abdominals and back muscles, and the bottom is your pelvic floor.

It consists of a bunch of different muscles that are connected via fascia and ligaments to your hips, back and core and since muscles do not move separate from one another how you move your entire body effects your pelvic floor muscles!



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Photo courtesy of <https://www.kenhub.com/en/library/anatomy/muscles-of-the-pelvic-floor>

5. **Sucking in your belly is harmful and will not get you a six pack!**

Think about it, we suck in our belly to make it look smaller, so we pull fat or excess skin in. As we do so, we displace what is supposed to be in our abdominal cavity, our intestines and probably some fat.

But then where do those go?

They move in and often down, pushing pressure downward onto our pelvic floor which can cause pelvic organ prolapse (movement of bladder, rectum or uterus,).

Six packs come from disciplined nutrition and lots of resistance training, crunches (done improperly) and sucking in will not help you to develop your stomach muscles but they will cause problems for your pelvic organs and digestion.

Let your belly be soft and squishy most of the time (like the pic on the right, NOT the left).

****To relax your abdominals get into table position (on all fours) and relax your spine as you let your stomach muscles relax towards the ground.**



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6. **You probably need to re-learn how to breath.**

If you think of your core as a canister consisting of a top, side and bottom, the top is the diaphragm, the bottom is the pelvic floor and the sides are your abdominal and back muscles.

Together these pieces form a pressure chamber in which air moves in and out.

If you're a shallow breathing breath hold like I was, then chances are good that you're holding in air, like all of the time.

Chances are also pretty great that when you inhale, you push downward instead of outwards OR when you breath you fail to engage the pelvic floor.

You need to get in touch with your piston breath. You can learn more here: <https://youtu.be/INXd7HLnn2k>

Practice in bed or in the car while driving.

The more you practice the more automatic it will become.

Start by laying down in bed.

Take a nice deep breath in as you fill your belly with air relax your pelvic floor muscles and abdominals.

As you exhale, engage/ lift your pelvic floor and diaphragm as empty all the air out of your lungs and allow your belly to naturally move inward.

**If you workout, practice exhaling upon exertion. The temptation when we do challenging things is to hold our breath and push down, but rather exhale and engage.

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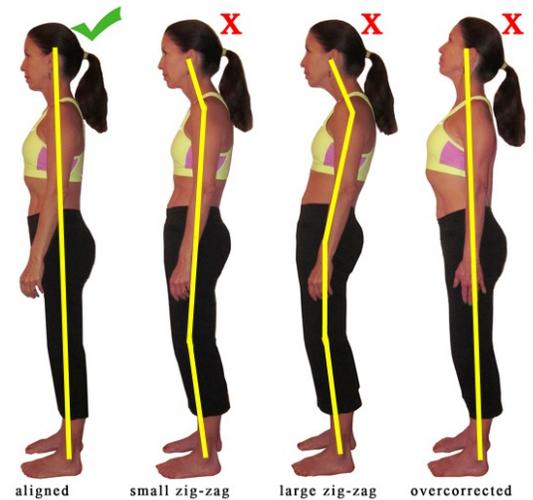
7. Your posture, alignment and movement patterns effect your pelvic floor.

It's funny. What's going on with our feet travels upward and determines our the positions of our spine, pelvic, hips, and head.

Likewise what's happening up top trickles downward too. Rounded shoulders and forward head tilt posture that arises from sitting or looking at our phones will ultimately effect the curvature or our spines, whether our pelvis is titled AND even how we walk.

Working to maintain a neutral spine is imperative because the stacked position that arises from that is the most stable and structurally sound.

When our ears are over our shoulders, over our ribs, hips then our pelvis is in a neutral position which is best for supporting the organs of the pelvis. (Photo courtesy of posturemakeover.com)



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8. No, just because you were doing a particular form of exercise before you were pregnant that does NOT mean that you can keep doing it without negative consequences.

The body changes dramatically to accommodate the growth and development of another human being in utero.

Your center of gravity changes.

Your ligaments and tissues stretch and move in new way.

You have added pressure due to the weight of placenta, extra fluid, a person.

Every body is different some people's shape and bodies shift and change more due to pregnancy than other's and that's 100% ok.

The important thing is to know that your body is going to respond differently to movement and exercise than it did in the past and regardless of your fitness, there can be unintended consequences here.

SO as you continue to move, stay active and lift things during pregnancy you're going to want to be ESPECIALLY conscience of how your body is responding and in my opinion, err on the side of caution, since everything is a bit more stretchy right now and you don't want to test the limits of ligaments and tissues for the sake of ego.

Leakage, pelvic pain, low-back pain, frequency urgency to urinate, IBS, irregular bowl movements, hemorrhoids, pelvic pressure, all these things can occur in pregnancy but they can also be warnings that we need to relax and scale back activity, remember to exhale upon exertion, not hold our breath and maintain good alignment (ribs over hips).

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9. Postpartum moms need to re-train their bodies

As mentioned above, growing a baby and moving with that baby in utero adjusts the natural movement patterns of the body.

Postpartum women SHOULD absolutely strength train.

Starting with bodyweight resistance and then gradually moving to free weights, we need to re-strengthen the core, glutes, and pelvic floor.



They need to observe and sometimes tweak hip movement and mobility and learn to lift heavy things (like car seats and strollers and babies) safely with their whole body.

Motherhood is a SUPER physically demanding job and when we don't think of it as such, we don't train for it. And when we don't train we risk injury and the development of harmful movement patterns. (Photo courtesy of bodybuilding.com)

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10. Gut health and pelvic floor health are related.

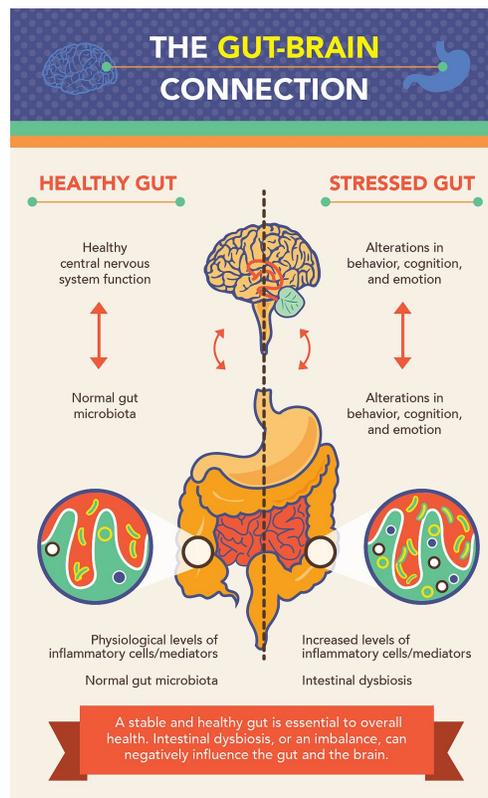
Poor gut health leads to a whole host of digestive issues, including gas, constipation, diarrhea all of which contribute to abdominal pressure and or the need to bear down frequently.

Relaxing the abdominal (NOT sucking in the tummy) can be majorly helpful for folks that struggle with constipation, but sometimes that's not enough.

Sometimes we are missing some important microbes that should be aiding, slowing or expediting the digestive process.

Sometimes we have too many of the harmful bacteria and they cause an excess of gas.

If you suspect that you're dealing with any of these issues, start first by relaxing the belly (#5 above) and adding in some probiotics.



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Natural forms of probiotics are kombucha, real sauerkraut, kimchi, and fermented vegetables. Kefir and yogurt contain probiotics, but for many people dairy is a gut irritant, so I don't recommend these sources.

Probiotic supplements work well as well. Learn more [here](#).

Pre-biotic's like fiber are also very important for feeding the microbes that you currently have while omega-6 fats and synthetic sweeteners are harmful.

If the addition of fiber or probiotics worsens symptoms then you might be suffering from small bacterial intentional overgrowth (SIBO) in which case you will want to work with a functional medicine practitioner to restore health to your gut!

Email me if you have questions about this: sarah@sarahsmith.me

References

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Image sources cited in text above.

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