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The Ultimate Guide to Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy

"It might seem scary and daunting to address these sensitive issues, but pelvic floor PT is extremely effective. You don't need to continue to suffer through discomfort, pain, or dysfunction. There are solutions, and we are here to help you find them."

– Dr. Julie Auman

What Is the Pelvic Floor? (And Why It's So Important)

Think of your pelvic floor as a strong, muscular sling or hammock stretching across your pelvis' base. This intelligent network of muscles and tissues is one of your body's most vital yet least understood parts. It doesn't work in isolation; it's a key player in a larger system affecting your well-being.

Its most important jobs include:

- **Organ Support:** It holds up your pelvic organs, including the bladder, bowel, and uterus, preventing a feeling of heaviness or prolapse.
- **Spinal Stability:** It works as part of your deep core to support your lower back and stabilize your pelvis, which is essential for pain-free movement.
- **Continence:** It houses the sphincters that give you control over your bladder and bowels, preventing leakage.

Sexual Function: A healthy, coordinated pelvic floor is crucial for sensation, arousal, and orgasm.

More Than Just Muscles: Your Pelvic Floor and Your Breath

One of the biggest misunderstandings about the pelvic floor is that it works alone. In reality, it's deeply connected to your core and, most importantly, your breath. Imagine your core as a canister. The diaphragm (your primary breathing muscle) is the lid, the pelvic floor is the base, and your deep abdominal and back muscles form



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the sides. For this system to work correctly, all parts must be coordinated.

- When you **inhale**, your diaphragm lowers, and your pelvic floor should relax and lengthen.
- When you **exhale**, your diaphragm lifts, and your pelvic floor should gently contract and lift.

This rhythm manages the pressure inside your abdomen. When this connection is off, it can affect everything from core strength and bladder control to back pain. Understanding this relationship is often the first step toward true healing.

Common Signs & Symptoms of Pelvic Floor Dysfunction

Because the pelvic floor has so many jobs, dysfunction can show up in a variety of ways. Patients often feel these symptoms but don't realize they are connected to pelvic health or that they are treatable.

Common signs include:

- **Urinary or Fecal Incontinence:** Leaking urine or stool with activity (like coughing, sneezing, or running) or having a sudden, overwhelming urge to go to the bathroom.
- **Urinary Frequency:** Feeling like you have to use the bathroom constantly, even if you just went.
- **Prolapse:** A feeling of heaviness, fullness, or pressure in the vagina, often described as "feeling like something is falling out."
- **Sexual Dysfunction:** This can range from pain with penetrative sex (dyspareunia) to difficulty achieving arousal or orgasm.
- **Pelvic Pain:** This includes a wide range of nerve-related pain described as sharp, stabbing, tingling, or numbness in the pelvic region. It also includes vulvodynia, which is any pain around the vulva.
- **Lower Back, Hip, or Tailbone Pain:** Persistent, unexplained pain in the lower back or



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hips that hasn't responded to other treatments.

- **Difficulty Emptying:** Trouble starting a stream of urine or feeling like you can't fully empty your bladder or bowels.

Don't Ignore These Signals

While all of these symptoms deserve attention, you should make it a priority to seek care if you experience leaking of any kind, persistent pain, or a feeling of heaviness or incomplete emptying. These are clear signs from your body that your core system needs support.

What Causes Pelvic Floor Issues?

It's a common myth that pelvic floor issues are only caused by weakness or are an inevitable part of aging or childbirth. The reality is much more complex. Dysfunction can be triggered by a wide range of factors.

The most common causes include:

- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Surgery (such as hysterectomy or prostatectomy)
- Menopause and hormonal changes
- Chronic stress
- A history of sexual trauma
- Limitations in hip or rib mobility
- Poor pressure management (e.g., breath-holding during exercise)

Beyond Weakness: When a "Tight" Pelvic Floor Is the Problem

Many people assume that Kegels are the answer to every pelvic floor problem. However, if your dysfunction is caused by tightness, performing Kegels can actually make your symptoms worse.



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Your pelvic floor can be in one of two primary states: weak (hypotonic) or overly tight (hypertonic).

Hypertonicity means the muscles are in a state of spasm or high alert. They can't relax fully, which leads to pain, urgency, and sexual dysfunction. This can happen in very strong muscles (like in athletes) or weak muscles working too hard to compensate, leading them to spasm.

A skilled physical therapist can determine the true state of your muscles and create a plan to either strengthen weak muscles or, just as importantly, relax and lengthen tight ones.

How Physical Therapy Helps: Your Path to Healing

Physical therapy is a collaborative journey back to function and confidence. It begins by listening to your personal goals. Whether you want to jump on a trampoline without leaking, ride a bike without pain, improve your sexual health, or walk a mile without discomfort, we start by understanding what matters most to you.

From there, we build a bridge from your real-life goals to a clinical plan designed for lasting results.

Our Process: From Assessment to Function

Our first step is to perform a comprehensive assessment to understand your unique body. We ask key questions: Is there tightness, pain, or weakness in the pelvic floor? Can you contract your core while breathing correctly? Are there mobility limitations in your hips, ribs, or spine?

We take all of these findings and work on each component individually. As you



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improve, we begin to build function back into your program. For example, if you leak when you perform kettlebell swings, we don't just tell you to stop. We reintroduce variations of the movement with lighter weight or a modified form, rebuilding your strength and coordination until you can perform that kettlebell swing confidently, without pain or leaking.

Your Treatment Toolbox

To help you achieve your goals, we use a variety of evidence-based techniques tailored to your body's specific needs. These may include:

- **Trigger Point Release:** A manual therapy technique to release tight, painful knots in the pelvic floor muscles, relieving pain and improving function.
- **Targeted Strengthening (Kegels):** We teach you how to properly perform a Kegel in various positions to ensure the muscles are contracting effectively when you need them most.
- **Functional Relaxation (Bearing Down):** Just as important as strengthening, we teach you how to properly relax and lengthen the pelvic floor, which is essential for childbirth and healthy bladder and bowel function.
- **Pressure Management:** We help you master the connection between your diaphragm and core so you can manage internal pressure correctly during exercise and daily life.

A Truly Holistic Approach

The pelvic floor is just one part of a larger, interconnected system. It is deeply affected by stress (through the nervous system), core pressure, and the mobility of your ribs, thoracic spine, and hips.

A truly holistic approach means we can't just focus on the pelvic floor and ignore the



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rest of the body. Our treatment will address all of these related systems to ensure they are working together in harmony, allowing your pelvic floor to finally do its job correctly.

Your Empowered Role in Your Recovery

Recovery is a partnership. A crucial part of your success will happen through the work you do at home. Your muscles function every day, so they need consistent practice to learn new patterns, build strength, and fully relax.

We empower you by explaining this process and providing a home program that may include self-relaxation techniques, core work, and mobility exercises. We also help you understand the importance of taking time for yourself and your body—an essential, and often overlooked, part of healing.

What to Expect at Your First Pelvic Health Appointment

We understand that seeking help for pelvic health can feel intimidating. Your comfort, safety, and trust are our highest priorities. From the moment you walk in, our goal is to create a supportive environment where you are in complete control of your care.

It Starts with a Conversation

The first part of your appointment is simply a conversation. We'll start by listening to your story, symptoms, and goals. We will also gently screen for any history of trauma to ensure the entire process feels safe for you. Before any physical assessment begins, we look at the bigger picture, assessing your back, hips, posture, and breathing patterns to get a holistic view of how your body moves.

The Pelvic Exam: You Are Always in Control

The gold standard for assessing pelvic floor muscle function is an internal exam. We



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want to be completely transparent about what this involves:

- For women, the therapist gently palpates the pelvic floor muscles through the vagina to assess for any tension, pain, or weakness. We will also evaluate how the muscles function when you perform a Kegel (a lift) and bear down.
- For men, the exam is external. The therapist assesses the pelvic floor function by externally palpating the muscles and looking at core strength and pressure management.

Most importantly, an internal exam is NEVER required on the first day. We will first explain the process to you, using diagrams to help you understand your anatomy. The decision to proceed with an exam is always yours, and it only happens when you feel 100% comfortable and have given your explicit consent.

Leaving with Clarity and a Plan

After your first visit, you will better understand your pelvic floor and the potential factors contributing to your symptoms. You will have clear next steps and, if appropriate, recommendations for tools like a pelvic wand to help you recover at home.

