

The right way to do Kegels: Exercise like a jellyfish

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Kegel (rhymes with bagel) are you doing them? If you are, are you doing them correctly? Should you be doing them at all? Shouldn't everyone be doing them, you ask?

Everyone should be exercising their pelvic floor, but doing Kegels is not always the best choice. Let's look at Kegels, talk about why you should or shouldn't be doing them and consider how to better approach your pelvic-floor fitness.

The pelvic floor, when working optimally, is responsible for maintaining your continence, holding your internal organs in place, for supporting your spine and pelvis, and for sexual function – pretty important stuff, yet many women suffer from a dysfunctional pelvic floor that leaks, hurts and doesn't perform as it should. The go-to solution has long been the Kegel. Developed by Dr. Arnold Kegel, it was a means of helping postpartum women regain strength in their pelvic floor – very well intended, but over the years the true version of the Kegel has been lost.

Kegels should be a conscious contraction of the pelvic-floor muscles followed by a conscious relaxation of those same muscles. The muscles run from your pubic bone to your tailbone and also your sitz bones. There are three layers of muscles, not one muscle as most people think, and it is helpful to know the whereabouts of these muscles in order to work them properly.

Most women focus solely on the contraction of the pelvic floor and forget about the need to relax. They also use the wrong muscles – typically the glutes and/or the inner thighs. They squeeze and clench while holding their breath in an attempt to do a Kegel when really they are holding their breath, clenching their glutes and bearing

down, thereby increasing intra-abdominal pressure – not at all what we are looking for in a pelvic-floor fitness regime!

And for women who *are* able to identify the correct muscles, many will find that Kegels make no difference or make their situation worse. So what's the deal?

We sit slouched in front of a computer throughout the day, which keeps our pelvic floor in a shortened (contracted) state all day long. We drive (slouched) to bootcamp and do intense activity with a tucked tailbone (because that is where our tailbone is used to living now with all the slouched sitting we do) and we leak a little on some of the burpees and jumping jacks in our bootcamp and think it is normal because we have had kids, and then on the drive home (in a slouched position because all car seats make us slouch) we do Kegels at every red light (because Cosmo said we should), hoping that eventually our leaking will stop.

Here's the deal: Kegels will never work when the tailbone is tucked.

Worse, they can actually make the troublesome pelvic floor worse because we are just asking an already contracted muscle to contract some more, when really what it needs is a chance to let go.

So what's a girl to do if Kegels aren't always the answer? Walk, don't run, to your nearest pelvic-floor physiotherapist and find out how to engage and, often more importantly, how to relax your pelvic floor properly.

A visualization I like to give people is to imagine a jellyfish swimming to the surface of the ocean – it's soft edges come together and it propels upwards. Then it opens and softens and floats as it relaxes and prepares for the next propulsion ... try it and see how it works for you.

Next, if you leak, no burpees or jumping jacks or running until you rebuild your inner core.

Lastly, if you have to sit, find a neutral pelvis position that allows your tailbone to be out from under you. This will allow the pelvic floor to be in its proper position for supporting you and your insides, and once you know how to Kegel, it will make the exercises more effective rather than a waste of time.

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Here's how to do kegel exercises (and how not to do them)

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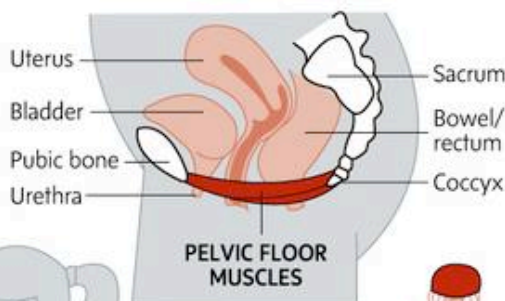
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Too many people forget to relax, a key component

Get those muscles moving the right way by sitting up straight - this prevents your tailbone from tucking.

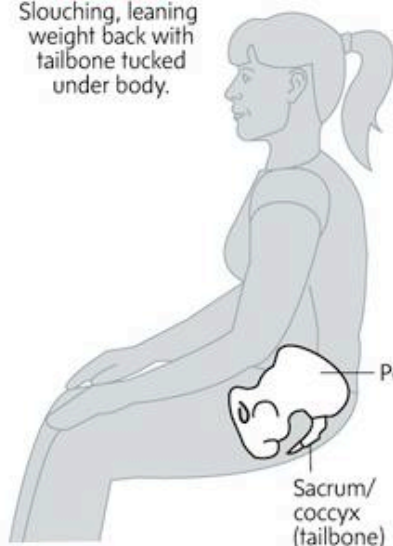
HOW TO DO A KEGEL

Kegel exercises are widely recommended for women to strengthen their pelvic-floor muscles, but if not done right can make matters worse.



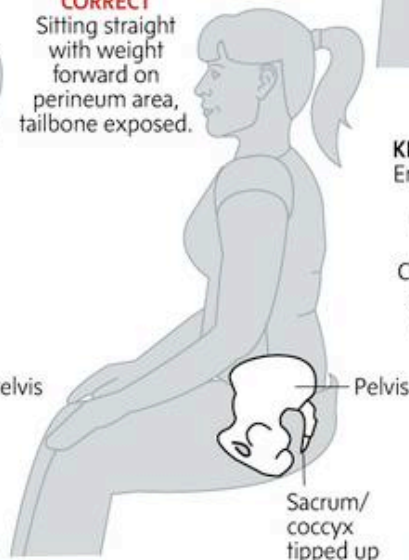
INCORRECT

Slouching, leaning weight back with tailbone tucked under body.



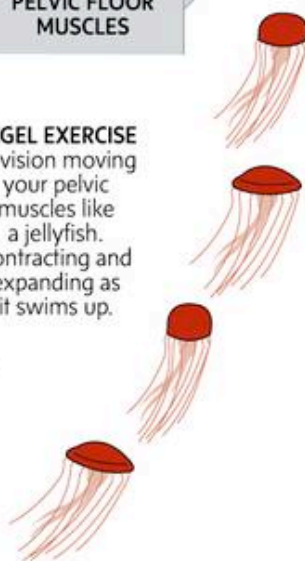
CORRECT

Sitting straight with weight forward on perineum area, tailbone exposed.



KEGEL EXERCISE

Envision moving your pelvic muscles like a jellyfish. Contracting and expanding as it swims up.



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