

# Chronic pelvic pain

## Information for patients

This leaflet provides you with information about pelvic pain, and how to manage your symptoms. If you have any questions, please speak to your physiotherapist.

### What is chronic pelvic pain?

It is pain that you feel in your pelvis or lower abdomen (tummy). The experience of pelvic pain is often individual and varies from person to person. It is called chronic pain if it occurs all the time, or from time to time for a period of at least 3 to 6 months.

Pelvic pain is common and affects around 1 in 6 women. It can be distressing and affect quality of life and your ability to carry out everyday activities.

### What causes the pain?

Pain is often the result of a combination of factors, which can be physical, social or psychological. It is rarely a result of just one of these factors, and sometimes a physical cause cannot be found.

Possible causes include:

- endometriosis
- pelvic inflammatory disease, which is an infection in the fallopian tubes and/or pelvis
- interstitial cystitis (bladder inflammation)
- adhesions (areas of scarred tissue that may be a result of a previous infection, endometriosis, perineal trauma or surgery)
- trapped or damaged nerves in the pelvic area
- pelvic organ prolapse
- musculoskeletal pain (pain in the joints, muscles, ligaments and bones of the pelvis)
- irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- depression
- traumatic experiences, such as sexual and/or physical abuse.

### What can you do to help yourself?

#### Breathing

Pain often results in muscle tension within the pelvic floor.

Deep abdominal breathing can help to ease tension in the pelvic floor as well as reduce pain. The diaphragm and the pelvic floor muscles work together like a piston. As you inhale, your diaphragm dome flattens and your pelvic floor muscles relax down. You should feel your lower ribs expand. As you exhale, your diaphragm domes up and your pelvic floor muscles contract and rise up.

Try to complete this type of breathing, in a relaxed position, at a time in the day that suits you, in a calm and relaxing environment. You can use it as a tool to manage a pain flare up as well.

## **Stress management**

Stress and anxiety are often linked to pelvic floor tension and can make it worse. Reducing stress and changing the way you think or behave in relation to your condition can help to treat pelvic floor muscle spasms and pain. Prioritising rest and maintaining healthy sleep and exercise routines is a good place to start.

Techniques to reduce stress, and change unhelpful thoughts and behaviours include:

- breathing and relaxation exercises (see 'Breathing' above)
- mindfulness training – you can use an app or follow guidance from the websites below
- counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy – if practising mindfulness and relaxation by yourself doesn't work for you, ask your GP for a referral to a psychosexual counsellor or talking therapist for extra support.

Suggested websites (\* also has an app):

- Mind: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- Headspace: [www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com) \*
- Mindful: [www.mindful.org](http://www.mindful.org) \*
- Smiling mind: [www.smilingmind.com](http://www.smilingmind.com) \*
- Calm: [www.calm.com](http://www.calm.com) \*

Apps:

- Aura

## **Use of lubricants**

When having sexual intercourse, we recommend the use of a lubricant.

Using a natural, plant-based, organic lubricant which is the right pH balance for the vagina can help to reduce discomfort during penetrative intercourse. Oil-based lubricants should not be used with condoms. Water-based lubricants are available on prescription from your GP.

If you are not using condoms for contraception then you can use the 'double glide' technique where one person uses a water-based lubricant and the other an oil-based lubricant.

## **Use of heat**

Applying heat around the painful area can provide immediate relief. A hot water bottle with a protective cover or heat pack can be placed over the pelvic floor (outside your underwear) or the lower abdomen for up to 15 to 20 minutes at a time. Apply the pack when lying down on your side with a pillow under your knees or in a position which feels most comfortable for you.

## Postural re-education

Our posture can impact on the pain we feel in our pelvic floor. A good sitting position can help towards easing pain. When you sit, make sure your back and pelvis are fully supported and you are not bending forward with your legs crossed. Try to avoid slumping on a sofa or chair. Avoid sitting for long periods of time.



Figure 1

You may find it comfortable to lie down with a pillow under your knees (see Figure 1) or lie on your side with a pillow between your legs (see Figure 2). This will relieve the weight of your abdomen off your pelvic floor, and in turn ease your pain, especially when combined with heat (see 'Use of heat' above).



Figure 2

## Avoiding constipation and straining

Maintaining regular and healthy bowel movements (poos) is important for reducing pelvic floor muscle spasm that can be associated with pain and straining. Using the correct position and pooing technique can help to prevent this occurring (see Figure 3):

- sit on the toilet with your feet on a stool so that your knees are higher than your hips
- lean forwards and rest your arms on your knees
- keep your spine straight
- avoid straining, instead gently breathe out on your effort, a bit like blowing up a balloon or blowing out candles



Figure 3

Keeping your stool soft and well-formed makes it easier to pass, eating good amounts of fibre and drinking plenty of water can also reduce the risk of constipation.

## Emptying your bladder

It is important that you do not strain to empty your bladder to completion when you pee as this can increase pelvic floor muscle spasm. Ensure that you sit in a relaxed position on the toilet with your feet flat on the floor. Lean forwards and rest your forearms on your legs. Allow your body to relax as you pee.

If you feel that you have not completely emptied your bladder once your flow has stopped:

- take five deep breaths in and out
- rock your pelvis forwards and backwards, then side to side
- stand up and 'wiggle the pelvis' then sit back down
- take five deep breaths in and out

**We recommend following this advice for the next 8 weeks, if your symptoms don't improve or worsen we would recommend speaking to your GP to get a referral to a specialist Pelvic Health Physiotherapist.**

## **Contact**

To contact the Pelvic Health Physiotherapy Team, email [kch-tr.womensphysio@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.womensphysio@nhs.net)

## **Sharing your information**

King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has partnered with Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust through the King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas' hospitals. King's College Hospital and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trusts share an electronic patient record system, which means information about your health record can be accessed safely and securely by health and care staff at both Trusts. For more information visit [www.kch.nhs.uk](http://www.kch.nhs.uk).

## **PALS**

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: 020 3299 3601

Email: [kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net)

PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

Tel: 01689 863252

Email: [kch-tr.palspruh@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.palspruh@nhs.net)

**If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Communications and Interpreting telephone line on 020 3299 4826 or email [kch-tr.accessibility@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.accessibility@nhs.net)**