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# Is exercise making you incontinent?

It's something many women suffer from in silence - but it doesn't have to be that way, says **Helen Croydon**

**T**HERE'S a reason I used to wear black shorts when I ran. And why I dreaded sneezing. New research shows one in three women will know what I'm talking about. One in ten may have given up sport because of it. I'm referring to stress incontinence - bladder leakage caused by pressure on the pelvic floor muscle from running, exercising, laughing or coughing. A recent poll by Coloplast found 35 per cent of women suffer from the embarrassing hiccup, yet almost half are too embarrassed to seek help. The most common cause is pregnancy because of the weight of the womb bearing down on the bladder. But why would it affect me (and possibly you)? I've never had children and am very fit. Turns out, exercise could be part of the problem. Jenni Russell is a personal trainer and author of *Pelvic Floor Secrets*. She runs workshops and one-on-one sessions for women who want to get

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## SPORTSWEAR TO HIDE ANY EMBARRASSING MISHAPS



These Stella McCartney Adidas shorts have an inside mesh to hide a panty liner. **£55, net-a-porter.com**



Don't fear prints, these Mara Hoffman leggings are black in all the right places. **£107, revolve.com**



Cover all your bases with a pair of Nidra Yoga harems. **£75, sweatybetty.co.uk**



This NikeCourt Hypermesh playsuit will let you take anything in your stride. **£75, net-a-porter.com**



This City Sky Run By skirt has cycling shorts attached underneath. **£62, lululemon.co.uk**

PIC: SHUTTERSTOCK

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back bladder control. Many are gym bunnies. 'I call them hot body, wet knickers,' she says. 'There is a whole secret community of women you would never expect to be affected – gorgeous women with six packs who when I ask to do a star-jump wet themselves. Most people concentrate on toning muscles that look good but the pelvic floor is the foundation of everything. It affects our balance, posture, bladder control and sexual sensation. If you work your upper abs like crazy or do lots of impact sport like running and don't strengthen the pelvic floor, you'll weaken it.'

I relate. Six months ago I drew the courage to visit my GP, after years of making excuses not to join the post-run coffee with friends. I couldn't believe how easily the problem was rectified with physiotherapy.

A number of celebrities have spoken about post-pregnancy incontinence. Last November, Kate Winslet admitted on *The Graham Norton Show*, 'I just can't jump on trampolines any more. I wet myself.' She was praised by women on parenting forums for being open about a common taboo. But not many know that over-working your abs can also affect it.

'The pelvic floor muscles hold the uterus, bladder, vagina and rectum in place,' says Dr Julian Spinks, a GP and adviser to the



**Kate Winslet admitted on *The Graham Norton Show*: 'I just can't jump on trampolines any more'**

**FLOOR PLAN**



Jenni Russell, author of *Pelvic Floor Secrets*, has put together three discreet exercises you can do every day to help strengthen your pelvic floor muscles.

**Waiting for a train  
BIG BELLY BREATHING**

To stimulate movement and awareness of the pelvic floor, while you are standing, take a deep breath in through the nose (try not to lift the shoulders). Feel the tummy expand, your organs move downwards and your vaginal muscles 'open'. Exhale and let your tummy shrink, feel everything return upwards and your vaginal muscles close. Try to hold this 'closed' sensation for a few seconds.

**In front of the TV  
LOWER AB LEG LIFTS**

Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet flat. Place your hands in the small of your back. 'Set' your abs by drawing the belly button in and then raise each leg in turn. Keep the pressure on your fingers light. The more pressure your back exerts on your fingers the less stable your core is, and the more you need to draw in the belly button.

**At your desk  
SEATED PELVIC FLOOR**

Sitting with your knees slightly apart, imagine you are trying to stop yourself from urinating. You should feel your vaginal muscles tighten but the most important thing is not to move your legs or buttocks. If you are uncertain of the movement, imagine that you are pulling your internal muscles upwards away from the chair. Try doing some short explosive moves and some slowly where you hold the squeeze for a few seconds. Do it as often as possible.



Hot bodies, wet knickers

Association For Continence Advice. 'When you pee, the muscles relax and when you finish they clench again. If weak, they stop doing their job. So the impact of a cough or running can cause water to leak.'

So why is it still such a taboo? 'In Germany and France, women are taught strengthening exercises after pregnancy,' says

**Kegel8  
Vaginal Cones are weighted cones you wear at home that encourage a 'clenching' action to build strength. Available on NHS with prescription. kegel8.co.uk**

Spinks. 'Here, they just get a leaflet. The fitness industry also needs to be involved. Sadly, pelvic floor exercises don't result in good selfies so they get ignored.'

Most exercises involve subtle squeezing motions and can be done anywhere. The NHS recommends at least ten contractions six times a day

for 12 weeks. And given a strong pelvic floor also tightens the vaginal muscles it results in better sexual sensation – for her and for him.

'Why would you not want to have better sex and better bladder control?' says Russell. 'People don't realise how curable it is. They stick on a sanitary pad and ignore it but let's face it, sexy lingerie does not look good with a panty liner.'

**MEAN JEANS** AS POPPY DELEIVINGNE LAUNCHES A DENIM PATCH LINE, HERE'S HOW TO GET THE LOOK...

**Mid blue shirt** £42, glamorous.com

**Cropped bootcut jeans** £39.99, zara.com

**GCDS cropped top** £119.08, farfetch.com

**Gilet** £27.99, newlook.com

**Suzie dungarees** £18, boohoo.com

**Pinafore dress** £35, dorothyperkins.com

**Miu Miu jacket** £1,425, matchesfashion.com

**Shorts** £39, misselfridge.com

**Unstructured backpack** £40, topshop.com