An tOspidéal Náisiúnta Máithreachais
The National Maternity Hospital

Physiotherapy Department

Bowel Care

Your bowel plays an important role in your overall health and wellbeing.

Changes in your bowel habit can happen for many reasons, including eating habits, toileting, childbirth, stress, menopause, pelvic trauma, and our activity levels.
Small daily changes can make a meaningful difference.

Physiotherapy can help improve bowel control, reduce constipation, and manage leakage, urgency or a feeling of 'incomplete emptying' when you do pass a bowel motion.

This leaflet provides practical guidance to help you improve bowel comfort and confidence The aim is simple 'you feel in control of your bowels, rather than your bowels in control of you'.

Healthy Bowel Habits

A healthy bowel pattern varies from person to person. In general:

- Passing a bowel motion 3 times per day to once every 3 days can be normal.
- You should not need to strain or push.
- You should feel able to hold on until you reach a toilet.
- Stool consistency should be soft, formed and easy to pass (Bristol Stool Scale Type 3–4, below)

Diet

Diet plays a key role in stool consistency and bowel comfort. There is not 'one diet fits all' and it often takes time to find the balance for you.

If stools are hard or difficult to pass (Type 1–2)

- Gradually increase fibre (fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, oats, beans).
- Increase water intake to help fibre work effectively.

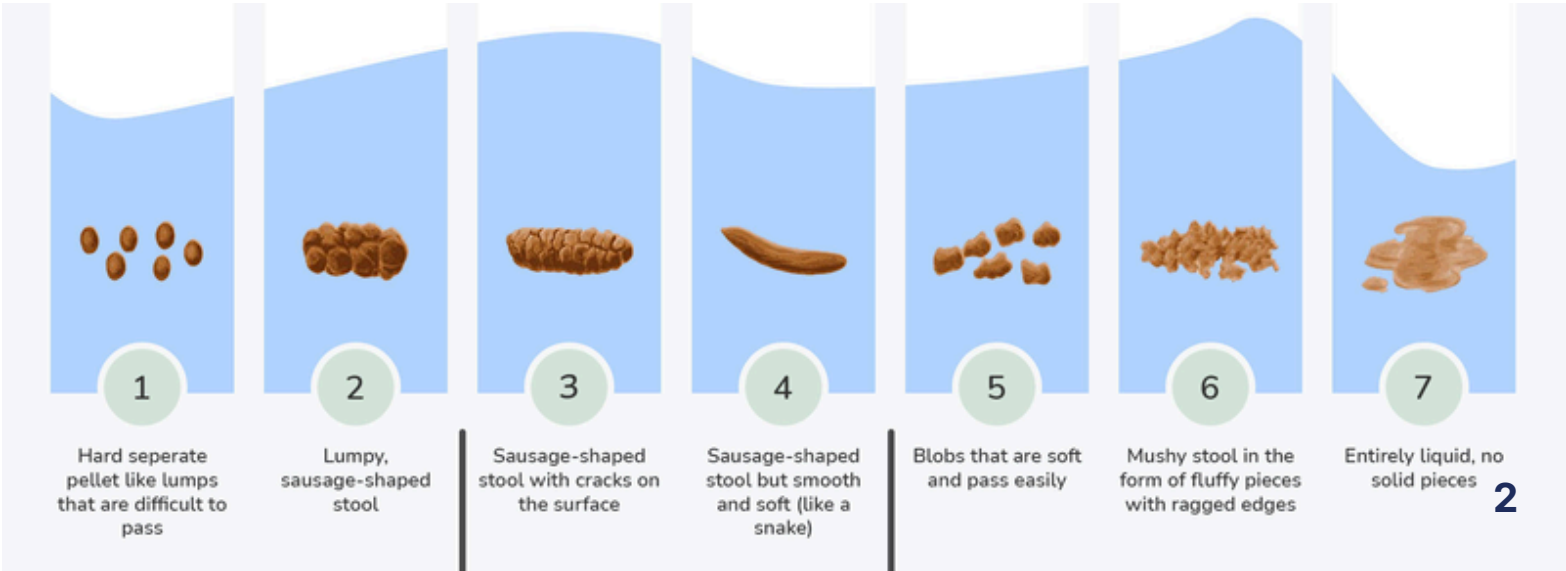
If stools are loose or you experience leakage (Type 5–6)

- Reduce high-fibre foods temporarily.
- Choose more binding foods (white rice, bananas, potatoes, white bread).
- Identify foods that may irritate your gut.

General tips

- Aim to drink 1.5–2 litres of water daily, unless advised otherwise.
- Avoid skipping meals. Regular eating patterns help keep the bowel regular.
- Eat breakfast to allow your digestive system time to work before you have to leave the house.
- Limit caffeine and alcohol if they worsen symptoms.
- Try to sit down for meals rather than eating on the go.

More information regarding fibre content of food / high fibre / low fibre diet can be found at www.bladderandbowel.org or www.nutrition.org.uk.

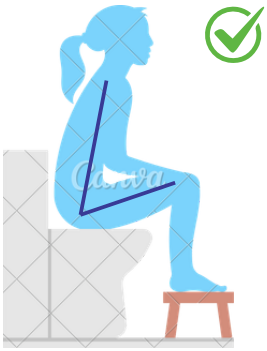


Bowel Care

It is important to avoid constipation as it puts strain on the pelvic floor muscles.

- Don't delay going to the loo once you have the urge to empty your bowels
- Ask your doctor about any medications you are prescribed. Some may be causing constipation, so you may need to make allowances for this.
- Avoid relying on laxatives; use for short term only.

The following will help you to comfortably pass a bowel motion:



- Use a foot stool to ensure your knees are higher than your hips
- Maintain a straight back avoid slumping
- Lean forward resting forearms on thighs
- Practice your deep breathing to help the pelvic floor relax
- Swell your tummy rather than straining - imagine you are blowing out birthday candles or saying the word "OOooo"
- **Relax and don't rush**

The following can help soften the consistency of your stool can help with stimulating digestion:

1

Variety of fruit and veg

2

Daily fibre in your diet (30g: eg nuts, veg, chia seeds, flax seeds)

3

Regular fluids (~2L water)

4

Movement & exercise

Helpful Tips

“I Love You” Massage

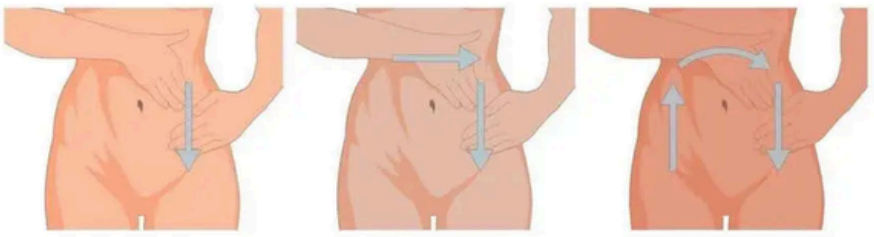
Gentle abdominal massage may help stimulate bowel movement, reduce bloating, and ease the sensation of incomplete emptying

The “I Love You” (ILU) massage follows the natural path of the large intestine.

- Lie on your back with knees bent, or sit comfortably.
- Keep your hands warm; use a small amount of lotion if needed.
- Pressure should be gentle and comfortable.

How to do ILU massage

- “I” – Down the left side Stroke down the left side of your abdomen from under the ribs to the hip. Repeat 5–10 times.
- “L” – Across and down Start under the right rib cage, stroke across the upper abdomen to the left, then down the left side. Repeat 5–10 times.
- “U” – Up, across, and down Start at the lower right abdomen, stroke up, then across, then down the left side. Repeat 5–10 times.



I L U

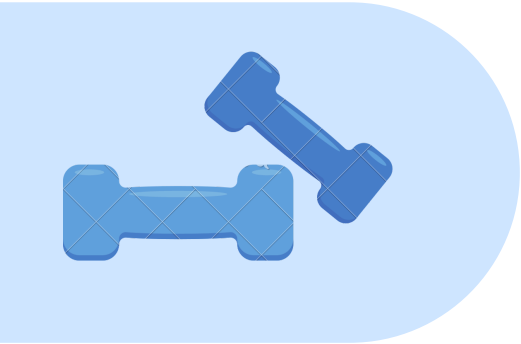
Tips

- Keep breathing relaxed.
- Massage once or twice daily, especially after meals.
- Stop if you feel discomfort.

Avoid abdominal massage if you have:

- Severe or unexplained abdominal pain
- Fever or signs of infection
- Recent abdominal surgery
- A flare of inflammatory bowel disease
- Pregnancy (unless advised by a clinician)

Exercise



General Exercise

Exercise has many positive effects on both your physical and emotional wellbeing.
A 20 minute walk every day can help with constipation.

Do not be afraid of exercise and activity because of your bowel

Think of all the movements you do on a daily basis. Normal movement is important for function.

Strengthening is important for your pelvic floor, mental health and often your sense of personal identity.
Try to be in tune with your body, if any exercise feels uncomfortable or you are experiencing leaking, don't continue and seek advice from a healthcare professional.

Click on the icon below to access daily yoga stretches for constipation.
Aim 10-15 repetions of each exercise

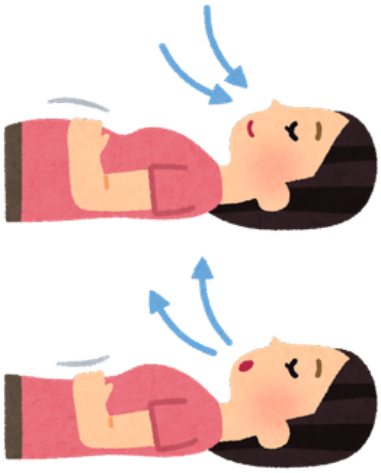
Diaphragmatic Breathing

Correct breathing lays the foundation for strengthening through your 'core'.
By "just breathing" you will gently moving your deep abdominals, diaphragm and pelvic floor.
It allows you to build the core foundation you need for daily movements, to prepare your body for exercise and manage stress and anxiety.

The diaphragm is the muscle that sits just below your lungs. Your diaphragm and pelvic floor move up and down like a piston while you inhale and exhale. This is called diaphragmatic breathing.

By slowly breathing all the way into the lower lungs and letting the tummy flop out, this helps to relax the pelvic floor. In turn, on exhalation, the pelvic floor is activated.

Practice 10-15 deep breaths throughout the day in lying or sitting



Next we will discuss pelvic floor exercises which can help to improve your bowel issues.

Pelvic Floor Exercises

Before You Start: Finding the Muscle

Your pelvic floor muscles are internal and do not include:

- Tummy, thighs, calves, buttocks, or eyebrows!

You should feel a lift inward and upward
Do not:

- Clench buttocks
- Hold your breath
- Squeeze legs

Different cues work for different people, experiment with what works best for you

Technique

Step 1: Contracting Your Pelvic Floor

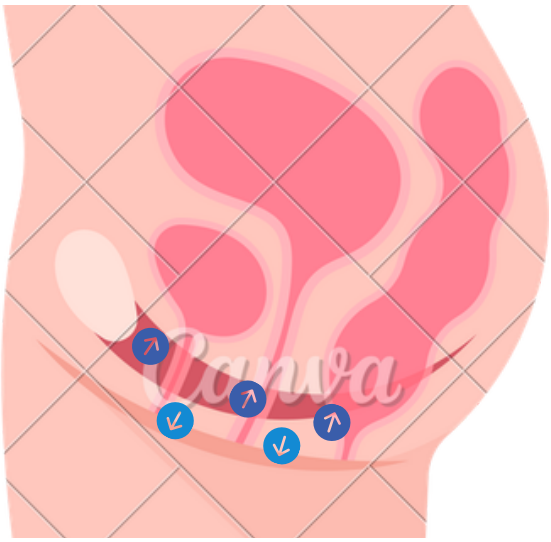
Gently squeeze shut your back passage (as if holding back wind), your vagina (as if gripping a tampon) and your urethra (as if stopping your flow of urine).

The muscle contracts from the tailbone all the way forward to the pubic bone

Draw your pelvic floor **inwards and upwards**

Release - let the muscle fully relax releasing all tension

First, practice tightening and releasing these muscles without holding or counting



Pelvic Floor Exercises

Step 2 : Relaxing your Pelvic Floor

The pelvic floor must relax fully so that we can empty our bladder, empty our bowel and have intercourse pain free

It is important to practice release as much as contraction. Allow this to happen gently - do not force or bear down

Relaxation exercise:

- Lie on your back/side and breathe deeply
- Relaxation is felt on the out breath
- It may help to imagine your pelvic floor muscles releasing like a drop of water hitting a still pond and rippling outwards, or flower petals gently opening

Step 3 : Strengthening your Pelvic Floor

Your aim is to be able to do the following three times a day:

- 10 holds of 10 seconds each
- 10 fast contractions

Start lying down and progress to sitting or standing when able. Begin by holding for a couple of seconds and gradually each week build-up to the 'magnificent 10'

It is important that you keep breathing naturally whilst doing the exercises

Give yourself time between squeezes to let go of the pelvic floor muscles completely

Squeezy is a useful app by the NHS to help with your exercises. **Click the squeezy icon to download!**

squeezy

GET IT ON Google Play | Download on the App Store

Pelvic Floor Exercises

Step 4 : Improving function

Use '*The Knack*': tighten your pelvic floor before coughing, sneezing, or lifting to reduce leaks.
Once you can do a pelvic floor contraction confidently in standing, you can try work the contraction into functional exercises, such as sit to stand, or your gym routine (squats and lunges, jumping)

How to Check Your Technique

- Mirror test: Area between vagina and anus should move up and in – never bulge
- Partner feedback: Ask if they feel the squeeze during sex
- Stop test: Try stopping urine mid-flow – only do this occasionally as a test

How Often to Exercise?

- 3 times a day is ideal
- Avoid overdoing it — more is not necessarily better
- Improvements may take 12–16 weeks (around 3–4 months)

Exercise Diary

Slow pull-ups
Hold your pelvic floor maximal squeeze for as long as possible (up to 10 seconds) and then let go. Then see how many times you can do that in a row with a 3-4 second rest between each squeeze

- I managed a hold of _____ seconds, repeated ____ times
- My goal is to hold for ____ seconds, repeated _____ times

Fast pull-ups
Maximally squeeze tightly and then relax your pelvic floor, count how many times you can do this in a row until the muscles fatigue

- I managed _____ fast contractions in a row
- My goal is to do _____ fast contractions

Physiotherapy Class

If you have been referred by your GP and are waiting to see your gynaecologist in The National Maternity Hospital you may attend an online physiotherapy session

Who Should Attend:
This session is for women experiencing:

- Bladder or bowel leakage
- Pelvic organ prolapse (e.g., bladder, uterus, rectum)
- Menopausal pelvic floor concerns
-

The session aims to provide you with practical advice to improve your bladder, bowel or prolapse symptoms

What to Expect:

- Lifestyle and behavioural strategies
- A better understanding of pelvic floor anatomy and function
- Common causes incontinence and prolapse
- Guided pelvic floor muscle exercises
- Advice on safe exercise
- Opportunity to ask questions and share experiences in a safe environment

The class runs monthly online, Email physio@nmh.ie to book your place.

Postnatal Bowel Issues

If you feel like you are experiencing bowel symptoms after having a baby, we first recommend you attend the online physiotherapy class Healthy Bodies After Birth.

The class takes place online every Friday morning from 11am
You can email our secretary for the link to the class and attend any Friday that suits you
njordan@nmh.ie

You can also self-refer to the NMH Physiotherapy Service for the first six months following your delivery by contacting physio@nmh.ie

More information on bowel health can be found by clicking on or scanning this QR code to watch a short video from The Pelvic Floor Centre

When to seek help

Speak to a healthcare professional if you experience:

- Persistent or worsening bowel symptoms
- Unexplained weight loss
- Blood in your stool
- Severe abdominal pain
- A sudden change in bowel habits

Resources

Click the icons to find more information on the advice in this booklet

Squeezy is a useful app by the NHS to help with your exercises

Patient Information leaflets on specific conditions and interventions.

General information on bladder/bowel control

General information on all aspects of bladder and bowel control