

## **Prolapse and exercise – professional guidelines**

Prolapse and exercise-related worsening of prolapse can be avoided with an understanding of pelvic floor safe exercises.

How to choose safe exercises, manage your weight and maintain your fitness if you've been diagnosed with a prolapse? These pelvic floor physiotherapist guidelines teach you how to exercise safely and protect your prolapse.

### **Read on now to learn about:**

- **Prolapse and pelvic floor weakness**
- **Can exercise make a prolapse worse?**
- **How to choose safe exercise for prolapse?**
- **Prolapse and fitness exercise**
- **Prolapse and resistance or strength exercise**
- **Prolapse and core abdominal exercise**
- **Prolapse and exercise classes**

### **Prolapse and pelvic floor weakness**

A pelvic prolapse can occur with any of the pelvic organs including the bladder, urethra (urine tube) uterus and rectum. A prolapse occurs when the pelvic floor supports weaken and stretch allowing the pelvic organs to bulge into the walls of the vagina (vaginal prolapse) or from the rectum (rectal prolapse). The pelvic floor supports include the pelvic floor muscles and the strong pelvic floor tissues that hold the pelvic organs in place.

A prolapse usually occurs in women (and men) who have weakened pelvic floor support. The pelvic floor is commonly weakened and prolapse caused by:

- Inappropriate exercise;
- Pregnancy and childbirth;
- Obesity and overweight;
- Chronic straining with constipation;
- Chronic coughing;
- Menopause and ageing; and
- Previous pelvic surgery.

### **Can exercise make prolapse worse?**

Yes, some forms of exercise can weaken the pelvic floor and worsen a prolapse.

If you have a prolapse you are likely to have weakness in your pelvic floor muscles and supportive tissues. This makes your pelvic floor more prone to injury since it is less resistant to pressure and strain. Exercise places downward pressure on the pelvic floor (shown right) If the pressure is too great for the pelvic floor to withstand, the pelvic floor becomes stretched, weak and floppy and less able to support your already prolapsed organs. This is how prolapse can become more severe with inappropriate exercise that is not matched to the existing strength of the pelvic floor.



## **How does a prolapse become worse with inappropriate exercise?**

*Prolapse and weak pelvic floor supports ⇒ inappropriate exercise causes pelvic floor strain ⇒ progressive stretch and damage to pelvic floor tissues ⇒ progressive weakness of pelvic floor ⇒ decreased prolapse support ⇒ prolapse worsens in severity*

## **How to choose safe exercise for prolapse?**

The key questions to ask when choosing exercise with a prolapse are:

1. How much downward pressure and/or strain does your chosen exercise place upon your pelvic floor?
2. How strong and well functioning is your pelvic floor? How well can your pelvic floor provide support to counteract the associated downward pressure?

These following safe exercise selection principles apply to all forms of pelvic prolapse including;

- Uterine prolapse;
- Bladder prolapse;
- Vaginal wall prolapse (cystocele/rectocele); and
- Rectal prolapse.

## **Prolapse and fitness exercise**

High impact fitness exercise involves exercising with both feet off the ground at the same time. The impact of landing forcefully increases the downward pressure on the pelvic floor and prolapse. The pressure of body weight is transferred to the pelvic floor and lower body. This is why prolapse symptoms often feel worse in inappropriate fitness exercises such as running and jumping. When repeated over extended duration, high impact exercise can progressively stretch and strain the pelvic floor supports.

### **High impact exercises that may compromise the pelvic floor include:**

- Running;
- Jumping;
- Skipping; and
- Some dance exercises.

Fitness and weight loss/management exercise can be readily modified to protect the pelvic floor and remain highly effective. Low impact exercise is the key to reducing impact on the pelvic floor. Low impact exercise is exercise with at least one foot in contact with the ground at all times.

### **Low impact exercises that are pelvic floor safe include:**

- Walking;
- Cross trainer;
- Road cycle;
- Spinning or indoor cycle classes (stay seated and choose low gears);
- Water based exercise; and
- Low impact fitball and fitness classes.



## **Prolapse and resistance or strength exercise**

Safe strength training with a prolapse is very feasible, however traditional strength training programs are designed for men and often fail to apply pelvic floor safe strength training principles

### **Pelvic floor and prolapse worsening during strength training is more likely with:**

- Heavy lifting and straining;
- Specific strength training exercises; and
- Unsupported positions when lifting (i.e. standing).

### **Strength exercises that place considerable pressure on the pelvic floor:**

- Wide leg deep squats;
- Smith machine squats;
- Leg press (seated and incline); and
- Weighted abdominal core strength exercises.

## **Prolapse and core abdominal exercises**

Scientific research shows that traditional intense core abdominal exercises increase the downward pressure on the pelvic floor and cause descent of the pelvic floor in women with pelvic floor dysfunction. The risk of injury seems to be increased with these exercises in women with previous vaginal delivery.

### **Potentially unsafe core exercises with a prolapse include:**

- Sit ups / abdominal crunches;
- Fit ball sit ups and medicine ball sit ups;
- The Hundred (Pilates);
- The Plank;
- Fit ball or Swiss ball sit ups; and
- Abdominal exercise machines.

## **Prolapse and exercise classes**

Some general exercise classes include exercises that may increase the risk of prolapse worsening with increased pelvic floor pressure. General exercise classes are designed for mainstream, not for women with pelvic floor prolapse. This means that exercises general exercise classes may be unsuitable for prolapse and require modification. The temptation in general exercise classes is often to perform intense and unsuitable exercises with the potential to worsen a prolapse.



### **Tips for exercise classes and prolapse:**

- High impact exercise classes – many of these exercises can be modified to be low impact.
- Strength training/resistance classes can include inappropriate strength exercises and techniques. These can often be modified or alternative pelvic floor safe strength exercises performed.
- Core training classes-intense core exercises will increase the likelihood of pelvic floor and prolapse strain. Core exercises can also be modified using techniques to reduce the intensity of the exercises on the upper abdominal muscles in particular.

If unsure about any exercise either leave it out or speak with your instructor for alternative exercises. Be mindful of the difficulty of catering to a large number of individuals with wide ranging abilities and expectations with pelvic floor safe exercises in group exercise.

"Prolapse and exercise" is by Michelle Kenway, Pelvic Floor Physiotherapist. Michelle is the author and presenter of the internationally acclaimed Inside Out Pelvic Floor Safe Exercise Program for Women consisting of Inside Out – the essential women's guide to pelvic support and Inside Out pelvic floor safe workout DVD.

### **Disclaimer**

This information is provided for general information only and should in no way be considered as a substitute for medical advice and information about your particular condition. While every effort has been made to ensure that this information is accurate, the author and publisher accept no responsibility and cannot guarantee the consequences if individuals choose to rely upon these contents as their sole source of information about a condition and its rehabilitation. Pelvic exercises accept no liability to any person for the information or advice provided, or for loss or damages incurred as a result of reliance upon the material contained herein.

