

Self-help guidance for vaginismus and pain with penetrative sex

Information for patients

Pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor muscles have important functions in stopping leaks from your bowel and bladder. They may also learn to 'protect' you against painful vaginal penetration (as in sex or in smear examinations). In both senses, they work automatically to keep you safe; you may not even realise your muscles are tensing strongly.

Simple pelvic floor exercises can put you in touch with this part of your body in a way which emphasises the control you can have. It also helps release tension in pelvic floor muscles. It is difficult to know how to relax muscles – it is easier to tighten them first and then let go.

The links below are to websites that help you to work your pelvic floor muscles especially to focus on releasing the muscles. It can be hard at first to know if you're doing it right. One of these websites might be more helpful for you than the other. If it doesn't make sense at first, you're not alone. Keep trying and it'll begin to work.

https://weare.nhslothian.scot/urologyphysiotherapy/female-pelvic-pain/ Especially: 'How to release your Tummy Muscles' and 'How to relax your pelvic floor muscles'.	
kegels-reverse-kegels-diaphragmatic-breathing.pdf (wordpress.com) Information about pelvic floor and how to relax it.	
https://pelvicphysiotherapy.com/pelvic-floor-release This links to a physiotherapy website with detailed instructions on how to release and relax pelvic floor muscles consciously.	

Self-exploration

Get familiar with your genital anatomy – start by adding to your washing routine so that it doesn't feel like sexual exploring but becomes something normal to do every day. Regular touch is important. It helps reduce hypersensitivity which comes with unfamiliarity and anxiety.

If you feel able to, try putting a finger into your vagina. Some people initially don't like the warm, moist feel of the vaginal skin. It may be easier to do this touching with a small vaginal trainer.

Hypersensitivity, desensitisation and familiarisation

Hypersensitivity: This is when the skin, nerve supply or the muscle reacts too strongly to touch so that the feeling is very intense, too much to bear, or is painful.

Desensitisation: This describes the process of repeating over and over again something which is a little bit uncomfortable until it becomes OK. By touching the same area over and over again the area and the nerve supply get used to it more and more and stop reacting so strongly.

Familiarisation: This means making something normal (familiar) like an everyday thing that happens so that your body and mind no longer respond with shock, pain or anxiety. It can often take some time for this to happen so it is better to do the exercises of touching or using trainers as often as you can - every day if possible but at least 3 times a week.

Vaginal trainers

Vaginal trainers can be helpful for desensitisation. You can use them on your own and feel in control. They give you the sensation of something at the vaginal entrance and then gently opening the muscles and going into the vagina.

Over time, this trains your vaginal muscles not to go into a protective spasm when you put anything in that area and eventually leads to being able to have vaginal sex.

How the trainers are used is important. You are trying to familiarise and desensitise. It's best if you can use trainers most days. You only need to take a few minutes. It needs to feel routine, 'no big deal'.

You might use the trainers when you're in the bathroom, perhaps in the shower. You may find it easier to use them in the bedroom or some other warm comfortable place. Being private may feel easier. You might find it easier to use the trainers when sexually aroused. The important thing is to find out what works best for you.

Position is also important. In most people, the vagina goes upwards and backwards towards the lower back. Lying flat makes it harder to gently put a trainer into your vagina. Try tilting your pelvis upwards by putting a rolled up towel or small cushion under your buttocks. Or you can stand up and tip your pelvis forward which brings your vagina in line with your vaginal entrance. Some people get in the habit of using trainers standing like this in the shower.

Put the trainer to your vaginal entrance, tighten up your vaginal muscles, then let them relax and then gently advance the trainer through your muscles. You will only need to go 2 or 3 inches inside. Hold the trainer for a few seconds and then gently bring it out. It may be helpful to do that a second time. Often it's easier the second time because your body is prepared and less tense.

When you are confident and comfortable with one size of trainer, you can move on to the next size. It's good to start a session with the smaller trainer first and work up.

The larger trainers are longer but there is no need to insert any further than the first 2 or 3 inches. Remember you are practising relaxing your muscles close to your vaginal entrance.

If you can manage the size 2 trainer (and certainly the size 3), then you should be able to manage intercourse. However it can be harder to relax your muscles with your partner in a sexual context. So it's best to take things in small steps. It's important to agree that your partner must respect you if you tell them to wait or stop altogether. This will help you feel in control and safe.

It may be useful to try using the smallest trainer with your partner so that you can show them how to insert it with you controlling the direction and movement so they can learn what works for your body. Another step is to try letting your partner gently put a finger into your vagina. The point here is to get your partner involved while still feeling safe enough to hand over a little bit of control to your partner.

Moving on to penetrative sex

It is helpful to agree with your partner a ban on any penetration with penis or similar-sized sex toy whilst trying to build up confidence and familiarity with your vagina using trainers. Instead try to develop a range of sexual intimacy which is for pleasure in its own right, rather than just a prelude to intercourse. Sensate focus exercises can help with this if intimacy has become difficult. Sensate focus is a type of intimate touching with the focus on the pleasure you feel both from doing the touching and from being touched. The aim is exploration for pleasure and with no focus on genital touching.

NHS Sheffield Teaching Hospitals have provided information on this which can be found at:

<https://publicdocuments.sth.nhs.uk/pil3291.pdf>



When you feel ready, the next step is to try to include use of trainers with your partner and then 'containment' of the penis or similar-sized sex toy in the vagina. 'Containment' means you are going to insert the penis or similar-sized sex toy as if it were a trainer. It's important you feel safe and in control here. Explain to your partner that they must wait or stop if you ask them to.

Before trying to use your partner's penis or a similar-sized sex toy for the first time it can be helpful to use the trainers immediately beforehand so that you have used all the ways that you have worked on up to now to be relaxed and ready.

Using the penis or similar-sized sex toy like you used the trainers; allow gentle entry into the vagina, just a few inches inside. Just stay still like this for a few moments then gently allow it to slip out again. Try this in various positions both with yourself and then your partner being in control of the insertion. Then you can go on to introduce movement when you feel ready, very gradually, while using the positions which you find most comfortable.

You should be prepared to find that sometimes things will progress smoothly and at others you will find it difficult. Remember that other aspects of your life can affect your progress, and your ability to relax and focus on these exercises. If this happens, be kind to yourself and restart at an earlier stage to improve your confidence before moving on. And in the meantime try to keep the fun and pleasure in other aspects of intimacy with your partner.