



Pursed  
lips

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# TIGHT LIPPED

*There's a muscle group even the savviest of gym goers are neglecting – but given it's vital to having toe-curling orgasms, maybe it's time to hit the floor*

**F**or a group of muscles that sit about as close to Sexual Ground Zero as you can get, the pelvic floor has long been the victim of some unsexy marketing; limited mostly to bladder control, childbirth and that pleasurable feeling you get when your Pilates teacher asks you to "zip up". Meanwhile, the sexual potential of the area – identified a century ago, when anatomist Robert Latou Dickinson discovered prostitutes had stronger pelvic floors than other women – has been largely overlooked, save those 15 seconds circa 2000 when *Sex & the City*'s Samantha introduced the gang to Kegels over brunch.



Until now, that is. Thanks to a decade of groundbreaking research and the development of new technology, 'pelvic floor' has become the hottest phrase in the competitive sex-aid market. Fervoured attention is currently being paid to this 'shelf' of muscles that hold up the majority of your lower organs as well as housing your vaginal opening. Recent launches have included the Intensity, which combines the clitoral stimulation of the Rabbit vibrator with an electro-stimulating shaft to shock your pelvic muscles into action. Then there are pelvic exercisers, like the UK-born Elvie, that sync internal devices and pressure sensors with apps to help you track your fitness down below.

We know what you're thinking.

A 'pelvic Fitbit' sounds like a click-bait Kickstarter campaign. But the tech start-up behind Elvie knows its stuff. Alongside co-inventor and pelvic floor physio Kay Crotty, its CEO Tania Boler worked on global sex education curriculums for the UN; co-founder Alexander Asseily started Jawbone; it's had investment from Google Maps creator Lars Rasmussen; and it shares Apple's manufacturing team. Not bad for part of the anatomy you once squeezed a few times, forgot about and planned to revisit only when tackling unfortunate leaks post-childbirth.

While the exact role pelvic floor muscles play in orgasm is still being untangled, Talli Y Rosenbaum, a certified sex therapist, sees three connections. First, as you're getting turned on, pelvic muscle contractions increase blood flow where it counts – across the *entire* clitoral structure. "The clitoris is a large organ that is mostly internal, not just the

## A STRONG PELVIC FLOOR CAN BOOST ORGASMS

tiny gland on the outside," she says. "Clitoral tissue absorbs blood like a sponge, creating pressure, which is perceived as pleasurable." Next, the shallow outer muscles of the pelvic floor may step in to maintain that feel-good pressure by pressing on the clitoral vein.

But the third area is undoubtedly the most exciting: "More recent research suggests the contraction of the pelvic floor during intercourse may facilitate orgasm by pulling the front part of the vagina closer to the inner portion of the clitoris,"

Rosenbaum says. In simple terms, a strong pelvic floor is actually trying to tag team the clitoris to orgasm.

The stumbling block (and Elvie's *raison d'être*) is that – even taking pregnancy and birth out of the pelvic picture – our floors are not in good shape.

Here's some fresh ammo for the standing-desk crowd: sitting all day not only hunches your back – it can also send your sex life into a slump. "We're so slouched that instead of using our sit bones, which tilt the pelvis forwards, we rest on our tailbones with our backs round," warns Julia Di Paolo, a physiotherapist specialising in pelvic floor dysfunction. "This posture contracts and shortens the pelvic floor. That pelvic shortening has an impact on the fascia system, on how your abdominals work, on how you're able to move your hips during sex, and also whether you can accommodate a penis or various sexual positions."

## BEYOND FLOOR-PLAY

Three other pluses of a firm floor



**A flatter stomach** Part of the 'Core Four' (along with the diaphragm, transversus abdominis and multifidus), a strong floor means you'll stand tall and flat.



**Less back pain** Dutch research\* found 57% of women with lower-back pain also suffered from pelvic-floor dysfunction, mirroring a 2014 Brazilian study\*.



**Better digestion** Di Paolo links a shortened floor with poor digestion and a constricted gastrointestinal tract – leading to gas, constipation and acid reflux.

## Watch your form

Sedentary working isn't the only lifestyle culprit. Our appetite for intense exercise is taking a toll, too. Dr Marsha Guess, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Yale, found that in female cyclists riding at least 10 miles a week, narrower seats were harmful to pelvic floor sensitivity\*.

And unlike the weak floors of new mums, high-impact sports can cause the opposite – but no less serious – effect: a super-tight (hypertonic) pelvic floor that frantically tries to absorb a sport's impact to hold your organs in place. But like a kind of pelvic anxiety attack, over time these muscles simply won't be able to relax. "Increased resistance at the vaginal opening means hypertonic women may have difficulty with penetration and pain during intercourse," Guess confirms.

For this reason, Di Paolo admits she gets nervous when women run intensively or do disciplines like CrossFit. "High-intensity exercise can be done by most women, but you need perfect form," she says. "If you have a tight floor, you'll compensate somewhere else, experiencing lower-back pain, a frequent need to pee and bladder leaks."

Research\* looked at childless female athletes and found urinary leakage occurred in 85% of trampolinists, 67% of gymnasts and 50% of tennis players. Scarily, the average age of these participants was just 20. Stats and trends like these are fuelling experts' desire to bring pelvic-floor awareness into mainstream consciousness – specifically among young women.

Awareness is all well and good, but the other stumbling block to an optimised pelvic floor is a question of form: women just aren't sure *how* to properly strengthen theirs. "People go to Pilates, but if that Pilates teacher isn't interested in the pelvic floor, it gets left out," Elvie's Crotty points out. "Then you're madly exercising your abdomen, which will overpower the pelvic floor to the point that when you pull your abdomen in, the pelvic floor gets shoved down – when, actually, you want it to lift up." This confusion about pushing down versus lifting up has also slowed our uptake of the Kegel, the pelvic-muscle squeeze-and-lift-ups the pros still consider an effective toning move if performed correctly. But that's a big 'if'.



**SITTING ALL DAY CAN SEND YOUR SEX DRIVE INTO A SLOW M P**

## Your main squeeze

Experts generally agree 30% of women are Kegeling the wrong way – by clenching the glutes and inner thighs and pushing down instead of pushing up. The risk? "It overstretches the ligaments holding up the uterus, bladder and bowel," Crotty says.

Which is where performance feedback – much like you'd get from a trainer in the gym – comes in, and where Elvie's developers believe they can help most. After the device is inserted (it's shaped like a sperm with a bent tail and small enough to fit in the palm of your hand), it links up to an app where you use your pelvic floor muscles to complete games: squeezing to hit targets on a moving screen, lifting up gems, pulsing to knock things over. All with what *Super Mario* never gave you – immediate pointers if you're going the wrong way.

If getting intimate with a high-tech device to the tune of £149 doesn't quite hit the spot, Crotty also recommends the classic analogue device: the penis. "Test your pelvic floor on your partner. Contract, and ask, 'Can you feel that squeeze? Can you feel me push? Can you feel me lift?'" she says. Di Paolo agrees: "Among clients, I have very few male partners who refuse this kind of 'exercise'."

Of course, with pelvic training offering a USP – sexual pleasure – that no Hiiit or cardio regime can lay claim to, it could also be time to power up your floor with the same diligence you apply to your glamour-muscle abs or triceps. Try Di Paolo's at-home workout, see right (doing this in the gym may get you arrested), building up to doing it once a day. With next-level orgasms just one of the potential pay-offs, it's well worth squeezing it in.

## THE ORGASM WORKOUT

Supercharge your pleasure potential with this circuit from pelvic physiotherapist Julia Di Paolo

**1** **Core breath** Sit on a chair with a small curve in your lower back. Place one hand on your side ribs, the other on your belly. Breathe into your hands, exhale, feeling your stomach engage and floor lift. Continue for 1-3 mins.

**2** **Muscle recognition** There'll be no Kegel mishaps on our watch. First, insert your finger into your vagina and, using your muscles, try to grip your finger and pull it up into your body. Got it? That's how you Kegel.

**3** **The basic blueberry** Take a big breath in and let everything release and lengthen. When you exhale, pick up an imaginary blueberry with your vagina and pull it up and into your body.

**4** **The old clitoral nod** Think of the clitoris as being the tip of a nose; you want to pull the muscles to make it tip down into a nodding 'yes'. This uses your superficial muscles – the ones that grab the penis in sex.

**5** **The advanced blueberry** Now imagine some stairs. Pull your blueberry up step by step, then release down in four controlled movements on the way (like you would for a Pilates leg lift). **WH**