The underappreciated muscle group of our pelvic floor

GUEST CORNER

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Our pelvic floor muscles play a pivotal role in our overall physical health. It is a complex structure of muscles that supports the pelvic and abdominal organs, controls bodily functions, helps with sexual activity, childbirth and assists us in having a good posture.

NATURE AND LOCATION OF OUR PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

The pelvic floor muscles are at the bottom of our pelvis. They resemble a hammock or a sling consisting of muscles, tendons, ligaments, and fascia. They connect the pubic bone in the front of our pelvis, to the base of our spine (coccyx), attaching onto the side walls of the lower part of the pelvis to the sitting bones on the bottom of the pelvis. These muscles separate the pelvic cavity from the perinium (genitalia and rectum).

THE MAIN FUNCTIONS OF THE PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

The pelvic floor muscles support our daily activities in ways we might not appreciate, such as:

- *Support:* they support the pelvic organs including the bladder, uterus (in females), and bowl. They form a supportive sling to maintain the proper position and function of the pelvic organs and help to control the intra-abdominal fluid when we strain ourselves, like coughing or lifting heavy objects.
- *Continence:* they play a critical role in maintaining urinary and fecal continence and help to control the urethral and anal sphincters to initiate and control the release of urine and feces.
- *Sexual function:* strong and coordinated pelvic floor muscles are essential for healthy sexual activity in both men and women.
- *Posture:* these muscles, combined with the postural and gluteal muscles, support and stabilize our spine for a solid foundation to maintain a good posture.
- *Assist in childbirth:* During childbirth, these muscles stretch significantly to allow the baby's' head to descend through the birth canal and in coordination with the core, gluteal and back muscles assist in the birthing process.

PROBLEMS IN THE PELVIC REGION

Life events like having a baby, obesity or aging can impact the function of our pelvic floor muscles. Weak or dysfunctional pelvic floor muscles can cause urinary incontinence (bladder leakage), fecal incontinence (inability to control bowel movement), sexual dysfunction, and pelvic, groin or back pain.

OUR BODY REGIONS WORK SEAMLESSLY IN SYNERGY AS A TEAM

Nothing in our bodies work in isolation. The pelvic floor is part of the body's kinetic chain. The lower kinetic chain connects the feet, knees, thighs to the pelvic floor muscles and connects to the diaphragm that in turn connects to the upper kinetic chain.

- *Diaphragm:* our diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle under our ribcage and flattens down when we inhale and contracts up when we exhale. At rest, the pelvic floor muscles mirror the diaphragm; when we inhale, these muscles descend down and, upon exhale, they elevate up. Thus, focusing on diaphragm breathing may assist restoring the natural movement of the pelvic floor muscles.
- *Gluteal muscles:* when the glutes are weak, the pelvic floor muscles work overtime to stabilize our pelvis. Strengthening the glutes and help to relax the pelvic floor muscles will benefit our pelvic health.
- *Inner thigh muscles:* these muscles connect directly to the pelvis. Tightness and weakness of the inner thigh muscles influence the pelvic mobility by preventing opening and relaxation of the pelvic floor muscles.
- *Nervous system:* if our body is in a constant state of stress or pain, the pelvic floor muscles increase in tone or spasm which can lead to constipation, diarrhea or incontinence, and need to relax rather than contract.

As a result, females who only do Kegel exercises will not solve their pelvic dysfunction.

EXERCISES TO MAINTAIN AND IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF OUR PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

While exercising, take deep breaths in and out using your diaphragm and feel your lower ribs expand as you inhale and relax as you exhale.

- *Glutes and inner thighs:* Lie on your back with a medium-sized soft ball between your knees. Bridge up by squeezing your glutes together, squeeze the ball, pull up the muscles between your legs, and lift your hips up in the air and hold for 5 sec as you exhale. Then relax all muscles as you take a deep breath in.
- *Relax your inner thighs and open up your pelvic floor muscles:* Lift both legs up to your chest, knees bent and hold with your fingers onto your toes. If possible, interlock your fingers between your toes. Move your pelvis and hips from side to side in "happy baby" movements. Relax and move in this position for about two minutes.
- *Stretch and relax through your kinetic chain:* Take off your shoes so you may connect your whole foot to the ground. Open legs wide, pointing toes forward. Anchor your foot and toes on the floor and lunge deep sideways from side to side rotating your pelvis around as you weight bear onto your lunging foot. Repeat slowly from side to side 10 times.

If you experience any problems with your pelvic floor muscles (as described above) or need further advice about keeping your pelvic floor muscles healthy, please contact your physician or physical therapist.

Lize Lubbe is the owner of Lize Lubbe Physical Therapy with its main practice located at 892 Route 35 in Cross River and a PT Studio in the premises of Apex Fitness (where her team focus on the rehabilitation of sports-related injuries). Learn more by calling 914-875-9430, emailing contact@lizelubbept.com or visiting www.lizelubbept.com.

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