



# MEN'S PELVIC HEALTH

**M**en's pelvic health issues have fallen behind in attention, research and recognition. Pelvic health issues can range from pain, leakage (urinary and faecal), sexual and penile issues affecting men both young and old, from sedentary to the weekend warrior or elite athlete. Pelvic health problems may be a consequence of general ageing, poor lifestyle choices or following an injury, chronic illness or surgery.

In general, the medical community has given women more attention regarding pelvic and urogenital issues, leaving men confused, isolated and searching for answers. From their teen years women are more used to having regular gynaecological check-ups, and have multiple platforms, including education, treatments, and support groups to deal with pelvic issues during or following

pregnancy and the menopause. Men, however, generally give their 'tackle' little attention (from a medical perspective) unless it doesn't work optimally. When this happens it is commonly linked to embarrassment or shame rather than concern or understanding of any underlying medical issue.

Public awareness campaigns and support groups frequently address women's issues of incontinence, pelvic pain and sexual health concerns. Women traditionally talk more openly to other women or friends about their issues gaining emotional support, advice and guidance on how to deal with any problem. There is less stigma associated with female pelvic and genital problems than in men. This should not be acceptable. Men are known to be silent in dealing with their issues and associating silence with 'strength' or 'stoicism.' They rarely discuss personal problems with friends or medical professionals, and thus don't deal with the issue. The consequence being suffering through chronic pain, isolation, broken relationships and potentially developing mental health problems including anxiety and depression. Globally, suicide ranks among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15–44 years of age. Worldwide, males have a 3–4-times higher suicide rate than females, specifically within the age range of 45–49 years. Getting

treatment for medical conditions such as pelvic health issues, which are strongly connected to mental health problems, is critical.

The pelvic region in both men and women is a highly complex area. Structurally, it must carry our weight, withstand loads during lifting, jumping, running and walking. The pelvis connects your legs to your trunk with multiple layers of very strong ligaments and muscles that must balance form (holding us together so we don't become 'legless') and function (allowing movement like walking, climbing stairs, getting dressed, bending or sitting). Within the pelvis are critical organs including your bladder and bowel, as well as reproductive or sex organs. An intricate supply of nerves to the pelvis ensures muscles, sphincters and organs work seamlessly together ensuring physical movement, socially appropriate control of voiding (urine, wind and faecal matter) as well as optimal sexual function for reproduction and





pleasure, without pain.

Issues in the pelvic region can develop for a multitude of reasons. Chronic illness, medical conditions, cancer and injury (following surgery or radiation) can all affect the muscles and nerves within the pelvis leading to urinary, bowel and penile problems. Pelvic pain can also develop from being physically active, for example from lifting weights in the gym or at home, cycling, running, skiing or playing football. Many different sporting activities can lead to the development of pelvic pain due to strain, overuse injury, poor technique, hernia or muscle imbalance. Likewise, being inactive and sitting for long periods of time (for example gaming or as a consequence of your job requirement), being overweight, having an unhealthy diet or stress can all lead to pelvic health problems.

Chronic pelvic pain (CPP) can develop in men (of varying ages and athletic abilities) without an obvious underlying cause, and be associated with symptoms of urinary, bowel and sexual dysfunction. CPP can be strongly related to pre-existing mental health problems or produce negative behavioural and emotional behaviours as a consequence. For example, stress at work, money concerns, depression over a lost loved one, isolation or divorce can all lead to anxiety which may impact bladder and

bowel control and sexual performance (inability to produce or maintain an erection or premature ejaculation). In contrast, persistent pelvic pain, issues with penile function and voiding control can impact intimacy, relationships, ego and your work routine, leading to body shame, embarrassment, isolation, anxiety and depression. Don't allow the cycle to perpetuate itself. Don't change your life, be it social, sporting or work to accommodate any pelvic health issues. Rather, address the problem by getting help, advice, medication, treatment and support to continue living a fulfilled life.

Pelvic floor physical therapy can be extremely helpful to address some of the challenges that men may have when their pelvic floors (the muscles within your pelvis) are not working properly. Physical therapy may help manage:

- incontinence following prostate surgery;
- erectile dysfunction;
- pelvic pain including chronic prostatitis, testicular and penile pain syndromes;
- nocturia (frequent urination at night);
- symptoms of urine retention which can often be associated with benign prostate hyperplasia and/or a tight pelvic floor;
- tight pelvic floor;
- chronic constipation; and
- faecal incontinence.

Physical therapy can offer many different treatment options including exercise therapy, trigger point release, acupuncture, and biofeedback (retraining of the muscle to work in the correct sequence). General body massage and deep breathing exercises can facilitate relaxation and stress relief which may aid in reducing

symptoms of anxiety and depression. Advice and guidance about living a healthy active life will go a long way to improving your mental health and, with that, some symptoms.

Remember you are not alone. Male pelvic pain is the most common urological condition in men under the age of 50 and the third most common in men over the age of 50. In Europe and the USA, prostatitis (inflammation of the prostate) affects on average 15% of the male population. The numbers are probably higher than this as men traditionally don't seek help or report their pelvic problems.

Getting treatment may involve a combination of talking therapy (to deal with social and emotional issues, anxiety, depression, relationships or work issues), physical therapy (using different forms of treatment) and exercise therapy (to reduce pain and improve function and control). Contact your physical therapist or medical professional and take the first step in getting your life back.



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