



the way, way down

New technologies may soon make *the Kegel obsolete*.
We investigate the latest internal affairs

Words by **Emma Strenner**

Remember the scene in *Friends With Kids* when unconventional parents played by Adam Scott and Jennifer Westfeldt welcome their “friends with kids” to their home and the discussion quickly turns to Kegel exercises? Jennifer Westfeldt’s character boasts she is in fact doing hers at that very moment. The exercises were also the punchline in a *Sex And The City* scene, when Samantha – while Kegel-ing over cocktails – responds to Charlotte’s query about what a Kegel muscle is: “If you have to ask, you haven’t been doing your exercises.”

All joking aside, the pelvic floor is an enormously underrated and neglected muscle group – and indeed it’s likely *most of us* haven’t been doing our exercises. We fawn over celebrities’ impeccably toned arms, but are nonchalant, ambivalent even, ⇨

to our strength down there, despite these muscles being paramount to our overall state of health and even youthfulness – not to mention their effects on our sex life and influence on incontinence. This intimate, rarely discussed and, let's face it, mysterious set of muscles, which literally hold it all in, is pretty tantamount to our self-esteem.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports nearly 40 per cent of Aussie women can attest to suffering from some form of urinary incontinence. Compare that to France where, on average, only about a quarter of women have problems – unsurprisingly, they're offered government-funded treatments to "re-educate their perineum" post-childbirth. I say it's unsurprising, as it seems France is where preventative health has long been light-years ahead of other developed countries. So is it any wonder that this emphasis on the Kegel muscles is just a matter of course for French pre- and post-natal wellbeing? After all, the female body is celebrated in every possible platform, from beer advertisements to health foods.

Kegel exercises have been around for decades, but now there's a slew of new TGA-approved in-office treatments that promise rejuvenation and strengthening that go beyond a few discreet, timed squeezes, providing a quicker, more effective solution to this unspoken epidemic. "The technology has been around for a while but the ability to deliver the energy safely to sensitive areas like the pelvic floor through these new modalities is new," says Dr Anthony Rixon from Melbourne's Enrich Clinic.

The recently launched ThermiVa employs laser and radiofrequency technology and promises a painless (just expect "warming sensations"), convenient solution for muscle tightening. With just one or two treatments, there are tangible results, meaning not only a solution for moderate incontinence issues but improved sexual satisfaction, too. The treatment is growing in popularity in the States as well, with Dr Christine Hamori, a cosmetic surgeon based in Boston, saying that non-surgical gynaecological procedures are rapidly on the rise.

There's also FemiLift, which uses CO₂ fractionated laser technology (a technique that's been widely used for complexion rejuvenation since the early 2000s) to stimulate collagen and help tighten the vaginal wall. A quick 30-minute treatment with no downtime, it takes the time investment (and remembering to do it in the first place) out of self-driven exercises.

Another option is the Juliet Erbium:YAG laser, designed to reconstruct the lining in the vaginal canal, essentially tightening the muscles and plumping the area (again using technology from the dermatologist's office).

Clinical trials showed an improvement of 60 per cent in the strength of pelvic muscles, while there was an impressive 70 per cent improvement after 120 days of treatment on incontinence, resulting in patients being completely dry.

For the traditionalists, pelvic-floor exercises, with commitment and time spent, can make a huge difference, but an alarming 50 per cent of women don't even know how to activate those muscles correctly. Getting the technique right is essential for it to work – the trick is a strong squeeze (think of stopping your flow while you go to the bathroom) and release, rather than an all-out, 100 per cent ongoing clench. "There are lots of devices that we can use to help speed up the process of pelvic-floor strengthening such as vaginal weights, pelvic-floor stimulation and high-tech bluetooth vaginal probes," says pelvic-floor physiotherapist Lyz Evans. "However, all women must start with learning the correct way to activate and relax their pelvic floor." And the factors that affect your pelvic floor don't just fall to vaginal childbirth; things like a history of constipation, obesity and age can all contribute to an accumulative weakening of these muscles.

If you're not ready for a laser but are looking to up your Kegel game, consider the Elvie, a small gadget inserted into the vagina that syncs with an app on your phone via bluetooth to give direct feedback on the quality of your squeezes. It's a mindful and more effective approach that discreetly boosts muscle strength and control.

With all these advanced technologies so readily available, the fears of losing control of your pelvic wellbeing can be set aside almost completely. But it does pose a bigger question: where do we place this "nether region" in our hierarchy of importance when it comes to physical wellbeing? The increasing demand for vaginal rejuvenation surgery has even seen the recent emergence of the "Genital Rejuvenation" section within the *Aesthetic Surgery Journal*. Sure, it's entirely unglamorous, but the pelvic floor is one of the most important sets of muscles we have. It's time we stopped avoiding the topic – to remain youthful, healthy maintenance down there is shaping up to be every bit as vital as hitting the gym. □

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