

Prolapse fact sheet

What is prolapse?

Vaginal prolapse is a common condition where the bladder, uterus and/or bowel protrudes into the vagina. Prolapse is very common; one in two Australian women will experience prolapse at some point during their lifetime.

Prolapse often occurs after childbirth and around the time of menopause. Contributing factors include pregnancy and childbirth, menopause, chronic coughing, heavy or repetitive lifting, constipation or regularly straining on the toilet, and excess weight.

Symptoms

The symptoms of a prolapse depend on how severe it is and your own circumstances. They can include an inability to completely empty the bladder or bowel, a sensation of fullness or pressure inside the vagina, a bulge or swelling in the vagina, bladder or bowel urgency or incontinence, and lower back ache.

Treatment and management

Without intervention, the symptoms of a prolapse can worsen over time. However, there is a lot you can do to improve your symptoms. Treatment for prolapse depends on the severity and how much it interferes with your lifestyle. Management and treatment options include lifestyle changes, pelvic floor physiotherapy, pessaries and surgery. Your doctor will assess your prolapse and talk to you about what they recommend for you.

Pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor exercises can help keep your pelvic floor strong, which can help relieve your symptoms and prevent your prolapse from getting worse.

It is recommended that all women exercise their pelvic floor muscles everyday throughout life, to prevent weakness and improve strength. Exercising weak muscles regularly, over a period of time, can strengthen them and make them work effectively again.

You can see a specialist pelvic floor physiotherapist as well as find lots of useful pelvic floor training information and videos online, such as on the Continence Foundation of Australia website (continence.org.au). It's also good to get in to the habit of always squeezing up your pelvic floor muscles before lifting, coughing, laughing or sneezing.

Good bowel and bladder habits

Even one instance of straining on the toilet can worsen a prolapse, so try to avoid this for both your bowels and your bladder. Diet changes including plenty of fibre and water can help avoid hard stools and the need to strain.

A good position for sitting on the toilet is leaning forwards and putting your forearms on your thighs. You can also put your feet apart on a small stool.

Lifestyle changes

For some people, lifestyle changes such as improving your diet, increasing your fluid intake, exercising, losing weight and stopping smoking can help treat your prolapse. Keeping your weight within a healthy range is recommended as being overweight has been shown to worsen prolapse.

If you suffer from constipation, treatment for this is recommended. To help prevent constipation and hard, dry stools, you should eat the recommended daily fibre intake and 6-8 glasses of water a day.

Physical activity is also recommended. Exercise daily using light weights or core strength and cardiovascular exercise such as walking, swimming or bike riding are preferable to high impact activities such as running, jumping or weight lifting. Heavy physical activities such as these can strain and push the prolapse down.

Pessary

A pessary (a small plastic or silicone support) can be placed inside your vagina to hold up the prolapsed organ. Pessaries don't fix prolapses but they can reduce the symptoms of prolapse and help you live more comfortably.

Surgery

In severe cases, surgery is usually required to repair the prolapse. Different techniques are available and may include the use of sutures, tissue graft, tape or hysterectomy. Full recovery usually takes around six weeks.

Useful resources

The Continence Foundation of Australia has useful information on prolapse, pelvic floor muscle training: www.continence.org.au.

Jean Hailes for Women's Health has a section on prolapse and bladder weakness: <https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/bladder-bowel/prolapse-bladder-weakness>.

