

# Oops, I peed!

Have you lost control "down there"? Here's how to get it back.

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**T**WO YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH OF HER SON, ERICA Ashmore was determined to get back into shape once and for all. So the Toronto mom signed up for a fitness boot camp. During one session, the instructor had the class do jumping jacks. Ashmore was up for the challenge of a high-impact workout but, like many women who've had babies, she wasn't confident that her bladder would be. She wondered, "Will I dribble? Will people see something?"

The strain of carrying and delivering a child can weaken the muscles that work together to support your pelvic organs: uterus, bladder and bowel. That weakening can lead to stress incontinence – urinating involuntarily when you laugh, cough or jump – and it affects up to 30 percent of women following childbirth.

## Solutions, short- and long-term

While researching products for her online store, everythingmomandbabyshop.com, Ashmore came across underwear with a super-absorbent, deodorizing fabric, called Stride. While the panties were a practical, eco-friendly alternative to panty liners, she wondered if there was a more permanent solution to the problem of post-birth leakage.

Ideally, the solution should start before your baby arrives. We're told in prenatal classes and pregnancy books "do Kegels" – the contraction and release of those pelvic floor muscles. But according to Angela Barsotti, who runs Ugly Duckling Pilates in Toronto, the famous Kegels put too much onus on contraction, with little mention of release or the importance of breathing. Plus, pelvic floor muscles can be tricky to isolate, so many women do Kegels ineffectively. (Here's how to get it right: Rather than thinking of stopping the flow of urine, insert a finger inside your vagina and squeeze the surrounding muscles so you can feel your vagina tighten around your finger.)

Time and again, pilates clients came to Barsotti voicing the same "plumbing" complaints, leading Barsotti to ▶



## Pelvic prescription

Pilates instructor Angela Barsotti recommends these exercises in sets of 10, three times daily.

### 1 for pregnant women or those recovering from childbirth

- ★ Sit on a chair, tilting upper body forward.
- ★ Rest your hands against your inner knees. As you inhale, release your pelvic floor. As you exhale, draw up your pelvic floor and lower belly while gently pressing your hands and knees against each other.
- ★ Don't move your pelvis or clench your buttocks.

### 2 for women who aren't pregnant or recovering from childbirth

- ★ Lie on back with soles of feet together.
- ★ Squeeze up from thighs as if squeezing an exercise ball between your knees.
- ★ Exhale as you squeeze and pull up. Release as you inhale.
- ★ Try to hold squeeze up to 10 seconds while breathing normally.
- ★ Relax and wait at least 10 seconds before repeating.





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conduct some research of her own. She now offers workshops that teach the connection between breathing and the pelvic floor. Through simple exercises (see "Pelvic Prescription," p. 51, for how-tos), not only can incontinence become a thing of the past, but women also report significant improvements in the bedroom.

### Yes, you can enjoy sex again

You may not have considered a link between breathing and sexual satisfaction, but Barsotti says there is one. "When they get close to orgasm, most women tend to hold their breath. They get tenser and tenser, then of course they can't release."

I can relate. After a relatively easy natural labour, sex was unexpectedly painful for nearly a year after my son was born. Despite reassurances that my second-degree tear had healed well, my marriage was dealt a serious blow. It got to the point where my husband was afraid to go near me, and I was afraid to let him. Would our physical relationship ever recover? The answer is yes, but it wasn't quick or easy.

Lisa Fielding\* had the opposite problem. After her daughter was born, the Ottawa mom experienced a loss of vaginal sensation. With Barsotti's help, she discovered that strengthening her pelvic floor could help. It took almost a year of focused exercises, but Fielding got her groove back on. "I wish I'd known who to turn to at the time, or that it didn't have to be this way," Fielding recalls.

Your body may never be the same after childbirth, but it is possible to rehabilitate your pelvic floor – and your quality of life. ❏

\*Name changed by request.

# Runaway mom

Which each footfall,  
Caril Phang's frenetic  
life falls into place.



EARLY IN THE MORNING, I ROLL OUT OF bed, listening for the hum that signals that everyone is asleep. Fumbling, I dress in the dark, pulling nylon pants over cotton leggings, tugging a T-shirt over my head and zipping myself into a vest. I tiptoe to the end of the hallway and hover at the door, trying to concoct some excuse not to step outside. But resolve grips me. I am running away from home.

I step into the chill and run, my feet thudding through puddles, a familiar burning sensation in my lungs prompting me, "Slow down, pace yourself." I run away from me – the spit up, the diapers, that time I went to the grocer's with a child's used cotton swab stuck in my hair. I run toward me – that me who needs to care for herself, all the better to nurture everyone else. I'm a mom. Sometimes it's hard to remember where I end and my children begin. Running is the ultimate reminder.

Before I had children, I couldn't imagine what would possess anyone to run. All I could

see was the sweat, the monotony and stress on your joints. Now joints are the furthest thing from my mind. As I run, the non-stop thinking ("Did the baby eat enough? Does everyone have matching socks?") becomes the methodical "One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three, breathe." My frenetic life falls into place as I run further away, gaining perspective.

As I summit a familiar incline, my breathing becomes more even. My run slows to a trot. The burning in my muscles is now tolerable – and thrilling. Sunrise streaks the sky as I savour my best companion: myself – aching, limp and drenched, but renewed and running now toward home.

I open the front door a crack and listen, hoping for 10 solitary minutes to brew coffee, leaf through a newspaper, enjoy a moment's sanity in the insanity which is my life.

Running gives both the thrill of the solitary journey, and the good fortune of coming home. I run away so that I can run right back. ❏

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