

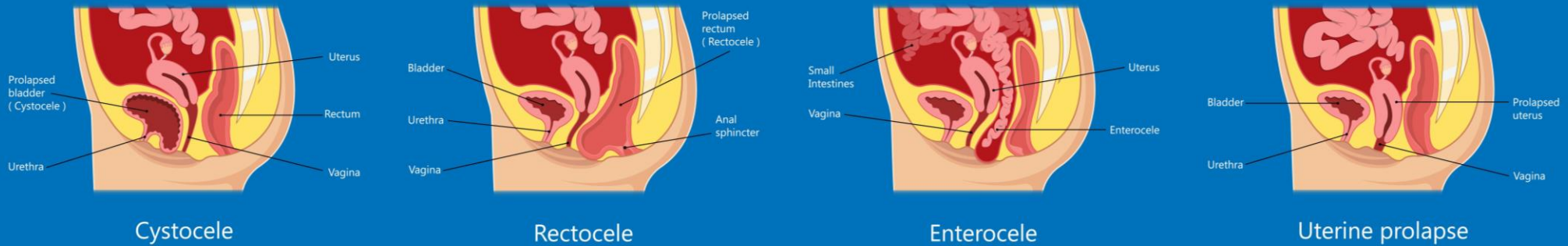
Myth busting pelvic organ prolapse

I have seen many women in my physiotherapy clinic who are anxious and worried about having a pelvic organ prolapse and what this actually means for them. They may have been coincidentally been told that they have a prolapse during a routine smear test or they may have started to have some symptoms of prolapse. Whatever, their circumstances they have lots of questions such as: Can I still have sex with a prolapse? Can I lift heavy weights? Can I exercise safely with a prolapse? I hope that this information piece helps to answer some of these questions, draws on the latest research evidence available and reassures women that there is a lot that can be done to treat prolapse effectively and that physiotherapy plays a good part in that.

What is a pelvic organ prolapse?

This is when one or more of the pelvic organs (bladder, womb or bowel) move downwards. It is usually felt as a bulge or a heaviness in the vagina or back passage (rectum). A prolapse occurs when the supporting tissues and/ or muscles between the pelvic organs weaken and stretch and the vaginal walls cannot be kept in place. For example, weakening of the tissues of the front vaginal wall means that the bladder bulges backwards into the front of the vagina (known as a **cystocele**, see diagram below). If there is a weakening of the tissues in the back vaginal wall, the bowel bulges forwards and down into the back of the vagina (known as a **rectocele**). Be reassured that your bladder or bowel will not fall out! It is your vaginal walls that are moving out of position.

Types of Pelvic Organ Prolapse



You will see two other types of prolapse in the diagram above. A uterine prolapse occurs when the womb moves into the vaginal canal. It can protrude through the vagina but most women are aware of this prolapse happening and seek help before this happens.

You may not know what type of prolapse that you have by feel. It is best to see a healthcare professional specialised in assessing and treating prolapses, such as a gynaecologist or pelvic health physiotherapist to find out.

Quote **Why do prolapses occur?**

There are many different reasons that a pelvic organ prolapse can occur. You will probably be able to identify with several of these reasons. It is usually due to a combination of factors such as:

- Pregnancy and childbirth (especially a difficult vaginal birth)
- Being overweight (BMI more than 25)
- Being sedentary (less physically active)
- Heavy lifting (through work, sport, caring for someone)
- Frequent constipation
- Ageing
- Genetics (it may be down to your DNA and how you are made up!)
- Persistent coughing (from smoking or a lung condition)
- Previous pelvic surgery (such as a hysterectomy)

How common are prolapses.....am I the only one?

It may feel like a difficult and embarrassing thing to talk about and therefore it leaves you feeling like you are the only one with a pelvic organ prolapse. Data shows that 1/10 women over 50 years of age experience symptoms of prolapse. However, it is likely to be even more common than this due to women not coming forwards for help. The good news is that there are lots of things that can be done to help and pelvic health physiotherapists, like me, are very skilled at treating prolapses. Sometimes just talking with someone about it can be really helpful. So, don't sit in silence!

What symptoms may indicate that I have a prolapse?

Often there is a feeling of heaviness or a bulge within the vagina or between a woman's legs. You may have difficulty emptying your bladder or bowels or find that you have leakage of urine or stool. Sometimes it may be more difficult to keep a tampon or menstrual cup in place and they may fall out. Less commonly women can experience pain or discomfort in their lower back or tummy or during sexual intercourse. If you have any of these symptoms it is a good idea to be assessed by a healthcare professional who is experienced in diagnosing pelvic organ prolapse as these symptoms can also be an indicator of other conditions too. Do book an appointment with either your GP, gynaecologist or pelvic health physiotherapist.

I have a pelvic organ prolapse, what should I do about it?

Once you have been assessed and it has been confirmed that you have a pelvic organ prolapse, it is a good idea to start regularly exercising your pelvic floor muscles [Park Physiotherapy pelvic floor muscle exercise for women](#)

If these muscles are working well, they will offer good support to the bladder, womb and bowels and can reduce or even eliminate the symptoms that you are feeling. If you are unsure whether you are doing your pelvic floor muscle exercises properly or if you are struggling with the exercises, do come and see me or your own local Pelvic Health Physiotherapist for an assessment. We will be able to give you your own personalized exercise programme that is right for you.

It is also a good idea to think about what you are eating and drink to keep your bladder and bowels healthy. Drinking approx. 1.5 litres of fluid daily will keep you well hydrated and avoid bladder irritation or constipation. Plenty of fibre in your diet from fruits, vegetables and wholegrains, will also help to treat or avoid constipation. Try to avoid drinking too much caffeine or alcohol, as this can cause bladder irritation. And try to avoid highly processed foods (these are foods that have been heavily modified and had lots of substances added to them such as prepacked meat pies, crisps, factory made pasta/ curry sauces, shop bought cakes etc.) as these are not good for our gut health and many of our body systems.

Managing or reducing your weight if your BMI is over 25 could be very helpful to reduce symptoms of prolapse. A good diet, as already mentioned, and some moderate intensity exercise five times per week will help you to do this. Please see link. [Chief medical officer physical activity guidelines](#)
I will give you more guidance on exercise in the following sections.

A vaginal pessary for pelvic organ prolapse may also be a good option for you. Vaginal pessaries are plastic or silicone devices that can be fitted within the vagina to offer support to the prolapse. They come in various shapes and sizes. Which one that you will need will depend upon the type of prolapse that you have and how much support it needs. It can take two or three attempts to find the right pessary for you but once you have it could make daily activities as well as exercising your pelvic floor muscles easier. Many practice nurses at GP surgeries are trained to fit vaginal pessaries. There are also specialist pessary clinics within hospital gynaecology departments but usually you will require a GP referral to access them. There may also be some private doctors, nurses or physiotherapists near where you live who are trained to fit pessaries but do ask what sort of service and follow up support that they provide.

Gemma Barnes

Specialist Pelvic Health **Can I have sex with a prolapse?**

Physiotherapist

Park Physiotherapy

Ley's Farm

Hockering

Norfolk

NR20 3JE

01603 881184

Email: help@parkphysiotherapy.co.uk

www.parkphysiotherapy.co.uk

For some women sex can be uncomfortable or even painful. However, it is not impossible to have good, enjoyable sex with a prolapse. It is about working out why it is uncomfortable or painful i.e. Are you suffering with vaginal dryness or irritation? Are you lacking the desire to have sex or feeling very self-conscious about your body? Don't be afraid to talk to your doctor, nurse, physiotherapist or even partner about how you are feeling. They will be able to help you address what is wrong and aim to help you feel that you can have enjoyable sex again.

Should I avoid lifting now that I have a prolapse?

This is the million-dollar question and unfortunately there are no black and white answers! This question is linked to the question about exercising with a prolapse too. It is often not practical to say that we are not going to lift anything ever again. Life is full of tasks that involve lifting whether it be as basket of washing or your baby/ grandchild. So, when lifting a good thing to consider is the way that you are doing it and the effect that you feel on your body i.e. Are you using a good technique? Does the load that you are lifting feel manageable? Does lifting feel as though it is making your prolapse symptoms worse? We then need to consider what would make your body more capable of performing the lifting tasks that you need to do? And this is where exercise and strength training are likely to be beneficial. Some good guidance from a physiotherapist or fitness trainer who is trained to work with women with pelvic organ prolapse, is a good idea.

Can I safely exercise with a prolapse?

We know that there are so many benefits of exercise to our body from helping our bones, our muscles and our heart health. We also know that it is an effective way of maintaining a healthy weight. So, to not exercise and become more sedentary does not seem a good option. The 2021 NICE guidelines for Pelvic Floor Dysfunction also states that there is no evidence that unsupervised exercise will improve or worsen pelvic floor symptoms. But they also state that physical exercise that involves repetitive loading i.e. weight training, can improve pelvic floor muscle strength and prevent pelvic floor symptoms from developing. As always more research is needed on this but in the mean-time, I encourage you to work with a physiotherapist or fitness trainer, who specializes in pelvic floor health and who can design you an exercise programme that it suitable for you.