



Women's Health

Electrical stimulation for pelvic floor muscle contraction

What is the effect of intravaginal electrical stimulation on the ability to contract the pelvic floor muscles?

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Pelvic floor muscle training should be the first therapeutic option for treatment of female stress urinary incontinence. However, an essential requirement for initiating pelvic floor muscle training is the ability to contract the pelvic floor muscles correctly.

Past research has shown that 70 percent of women with pelvic floor dysfunction were unable to contract their pelvic floor muscles correctly and 97 percent could perform only a weak contraction. Because these muscles are not directly visible to the patient, teaching correct contractions can be a challenge for physiotherapists.

An international collaboration of physiotherapists conducted a randomised trial of intravaginal electrical stimulation to see whether it could assist women with stress urinary incontinence to learn to contract their pelvic floor muscles more effectively.

Sixty-four women were enrolled in the study. For eight weeks, women randomised to the experimental group received weekly twenty-minute sessions of intravaginal electrical stimulation with instructions to attempt pelvic floor muscle contractions during the bursts of electrical stimulation in the final ten minutes of each session. The control group received no intervention.



After the intervention, the ability to contract the pelvic floor muscles was acquired by 36 percent of the experimental group and twelve percent of the control group (absolute risk difference 0.24, 95% CI 0.02 to 0.43). The experimental group also improved by a mean of two points more than the control group on the ICIQ-UI-SF score (95% CI 0.02 to 3.97).

Although the main estimates of these effects indicate that the effects are large enough to be worthwhile, the precision of these estimates was low, so it is not possible to confirm whether the effects are large enough to be considered worth the time and inconvenience of the intervention.

However, if the ability to voluntarily contract the pelvic floor muscles is learnt, then it allows physiotherapists to proceed with a pelvic floor muscle training programme, which is known to bring about much greater benefits.

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