

Pelvic Pain

How a Physical Therapist Can Help



Pelvic pain is an “umbrella term” that may include conditions such as vulvodynia (pain in the vulvar area, which refers to the female external genital organs including the labia, clitoris, and entrance to the vagina; and pain that also may extend to the area between the vagina and anus, thigh or buttock and is often associated with discomfort in the urethra and rectum); vagismus (vaginal tightness that causes pain with penetration and makes intercourse painful, difficult and sometimes impossible); vulvar vestibulitis (inflammation, redness and pain at the opening of the vagina); pelvic muscle tension syndromes (pain, tightness or spasm in the pelvic muscles); coccydynia (pain in the tailbone/coccyx); endometriosis (tissue similar to the lining of the uterus, also found elsewhere in the body, mainly in the abdominal cavity, with associated pain, especially during menstruation); dysmenorrhea (pain with menstruation); dyspareunia (pain with intercourse); and interstitial cystitis (recurring discomfort or pain in the bladder and the surrounding pelvic region).

Pelvic pain is a condition that affects a number of women, but, unfortunately, it also is poorly understood and rarely discussed.

What Causes Pelvic Pain?

A number of body systems may be involved in pelvic pain. These include the reproductive, urinary, gastrointestinal, neurological, psychological, and musculoskeletal systems.

The musculoskeletal system includes the muscles, connective tissues and joints of the pelvis, which are affected by the nerves and blood supply.

The structures of the pelvis are subject to the same causes of pain that affect the low back, knee, or other areas. For example, muscles, ligaments, and tendons can get overstretched, partially torn, or cut during childbirth or surgery, or because of a trauma such as a car accident or sexual abuse.

Or, muscles can become weak from disuse or tight and immobile from injury. Joints may be hypomobile (unable to move as much as it should) or hypermobile (allowing too much motion). Habitual postures, positions, or movements can also slowly stretch or tighten structures around the pelvis and lead to dysfunction and pain. The abdominal, low back, and hip muscles all attach to the pelvis and affect its position and function. If they are tight or weak the pelvis will be stiff and tight or unstable, or both. Any of these can lead to pain.

The pelvic muscles or joints may be the sole cause of pain or they may be just part of the overall problem.

How a Physical Therapist Can Help

When the cause of the pain lies in the musculoskeletal system, a woman should seek the expertise of a physical therapist, whose knowledge of movement and function is key to restoring the proper function of the pelvis.

The pelvis serves several important functions in the body. It supports the weight of the body from the vertebral column, and it also protects and supports the lower organs, including the urinary bladder, the reproductive organs, and the developing fetus in a pregnant woman. In addition, nearly every movement and position of the human body relies on the pelvis.

Like the rest of the body, proper activity and balance between all of the muscles, joints, and tissues of the pelvis are essential for pain-free functioning. Your physical therapist will conduct a thorough evaluation of your musculoskeletal system to determine the cause of the problems and will design a program to address those problems.

Physical therapy techniques for joint and soft tissue dysfunction may include exercise, education, and modalities including ultrasound, electrical stimulation, biofeedback, and heat and cold. These techniques are part of a physical therapist program designed to reduce tightness, dysfunction, weakness, and pain in the pelvis.

The American Physical Therapy Association

Founded in 1956, the Home Health Section of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) is devoted to the development of standards of practice, education, providing information on regulatory and reimbursement issues, and developing a unified approach to the delivery of home health services. Physical therapists who are members of APTA are bound by the Association's Code of Ethics and are especially committed to providing competent and compassionate care.

Who Are Physical Therapists?

Physical therapists are health care professionals who diagnose and manage individuals of all ages, from newborns to elders, who have medical problems or other health-related conditions that limit their abilities to move and perform functional activities in their daily lives. Physical therapists examine each individual and develop a plan of care using treatment techniques to promote the ability to move, reduce pain, restore function, and prevent disability. Physical therapists also work with individuals to prevent the loss of mobility by developing fitness- and wellness-oriented programs for healthier and more active lifestyles.

Physical therapists who specialize in women's health manage women's health concerns throughout the life cycle, including musculoskeletal dysfunctions of pregnancy and postpartum, prenatal and postpartum exercise programs, pain management during labor and delivery, post cesarean care, incontinence, osteoporosis, fibromyalgia, the female athlete, pelvic pain diagnoses, post-mastectomy rehabilitation lymphedema management, special concerns of menopause, and more.

The Section on Women's Health of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA)

The Section on Women's Health is a specialty section of the American Physical Therapy Association. Section members are physical therapists and physical therapist assistants from across the US who have a special interest in improving the health of women through physical therapy intervention. Members are involved in treatment, research, writing, education, and lobbying activities to promote physical therapists as an integral part of improving and maintaining the well being of women across the lifespan. The section develops educational resources, training, practice, and education standards and supports research addressing women's health issues.

To learn more about physical therapy and women's health, please visit the Section on Women's Health of APTA at www.womenshealthapta.org. To find a physical therapist in your area as well as physical therapy news and information, please visit www.apta.org/consumer.

References

Lukban JC, Parkin JV, Holzberg AS, Carballo R, Kellogg-Spadt S, Whitmore KE. Interstitial cystitis and pelvic floor dysfunction: a comprehensive review. *Pain Med.* 2001;2:60-71.

Oyama IA, Rejba A, Lukban JC, et al. Modified Thiele massage as therapeutic intervention for female patients with interstitial cystitis and high-tone pelvic floor dysfunction. *Urology.* 2004;64:862-865.

Additional Resources

International Pelvic Pain Society
www.pelvicpain.org

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
www.acog.org

The National Pain Foundation
www.nationalpainfoundation.org

National Vulvodynia Association
www.nva.org

