

PromoCon guidelines for writing pelvic floor literature

PLAIN ENGLISH
CAMPAIGN
CHARTER MARK

PromoCon works to improve life for people with bladder or bowel problems.

We are part of the Disabled Living Centre in Manchester (registered charity number 224742).

**Information in these guidelines is based on current research.
You can get references by phoning us on 0161 834 2001.**

Gill Pearl, Project Development Manager, PromoCon
Many thanks to Julia Herbert, Specialist Physiotherapist, for her advice and support.

11 million people in Britain find it hard to read health literature.

Leaflets are a necessary part of health education. They are used to inform people, to prevent difficulties, and to support the advice given by their healthcare professional.

We reviewed the free information leaflets about the pelvic floor. There are wide variations in the quality. Some leaflets were less accurate and hard to understand.

Literature must be accurate, clear and self-explanatory.

There are several reasons why information about pelvic floor exercises must be clear.

- Professionals can't teach pelvic floor exercises to all people directly.
- Some people will choose to teach themselves so they won't need any help.
- People often share literature. A leaflet that is given to a patient may end up being used by someone else.
- People often forget information that is given verbally.
- Literature that is not clear to the reader is a waste of time and money.

Healthcare professionals are often asked to write literature. They have a high level of technical knowledge about their subject but they are rarely given guidance about how to write in an appropriate way.

These guidelines aim to help healthcare professionals share their skills by writing clear literature.

Tips for designing literature

Changing the style and presentation can make the literature easier to read.

Ask the target readers to help and give feedback.

If you would like any help, please contact us for more information.

Who are your target readers?

Always decide who the information is aimed at. What does this group of people need to know? You can then alter the style and content to be more relevant for this group.

Content

- Don't assume that the reader has any previous knowledge.
 - Cut out any confusing or unnecessary detail.
 - Keep to the point with the essential information.
 - Keep anatomical explanations simple. It is rarely necessary to go into technical detail.
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Language and choice of words

- Always use plain English. Do not use jargon or abbreviations.
 - Use a language style which is appropriate for the reader. 'It is cool to do the exercises' may not appeal to elderly people.
 - Use active and personal language. 'You' and 'we' will reach out to the reader. 'You can exercise sitting or lying down' is better than 'exercises can be done...'
 - Use clear and short sentences.
 - Only have one idea in each sentence.
 - Long sentences with a comma or joined with 'and' could be split into two.
 - Avoid using colons (:), semicolons (;) or hyphens (-).
 - Use the same words for the same thing every time.
 - Choose your vocabulary carefully (wee, urine). What words would your readers use?
 - Use numbers not the words for the numbers.
 - Don't give options. 'Do this 6 times' is better than 'do this 5 or 6 times'.
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The layout of the leaflet

- Use a clear font (arial, univers or comic sans) of at least 12 points. 14 points is preferable.
- Space the text out - it must not look too cramped.
- Present information in a logical order, one step at a time.
- Use bullet points.
- Avoid BLOCK CAPITALS, *italics* or underlining.
- Use **bold** to highlight a word.
- Don't justify the text - allow the right edge of the text to be ragged.
- Write contact addresses as they appear on an envelope.

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- Make it easy for the reader to find what they need to know. A **question and answer format** is good. It can also give the impression that people have asked the questions before and the reader is not the only one with the problems.
- Keep the overall look of the leaflet clear and simple.

Pictures and diagrams

- Use a few, clear pictures, simple diagrams or photographs. These can give extra information. They can also support what you have written.
 - Make sure that you put pictures next to the relevant text. If appropriate, include a heading.
 - Hand-drawn pictures can look childish and unprofessional. They often do not photocopy easily and can be unclear.
 - Use simple drawings without shading or extra detail. Many people do not like medical pictures.
 - Do not run writing over the top of a photograph or diagram.
 - Make sure that any pictures are large enough to be clear.
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General

- Make your leaflet sound friendly and approachable, not like a medical textbook.
- Be positive and encouraging.
- Paper should not be too thin or print and pictures will show through from the other side.
- Use matt paper rather than glossy paper.

The blue writing suggests phrases that you could use in your leaflet. Use some of them and adapt them for your reader.

Choose a title that the reader can identify with. Readers may not know that they have a pelvic floor. Or they may not realise that their pelvic floor could be the reason for their problems. They are not likely to read a leaflet called 'pelvic floor muscle exercises.'

Get the reader's attention then make them feel that it is worth reading on.

You are not alone.

There are many other people who leak urine when they don't want to.

Don't suffer in silence

Get help - many people with the same problem have been cured.

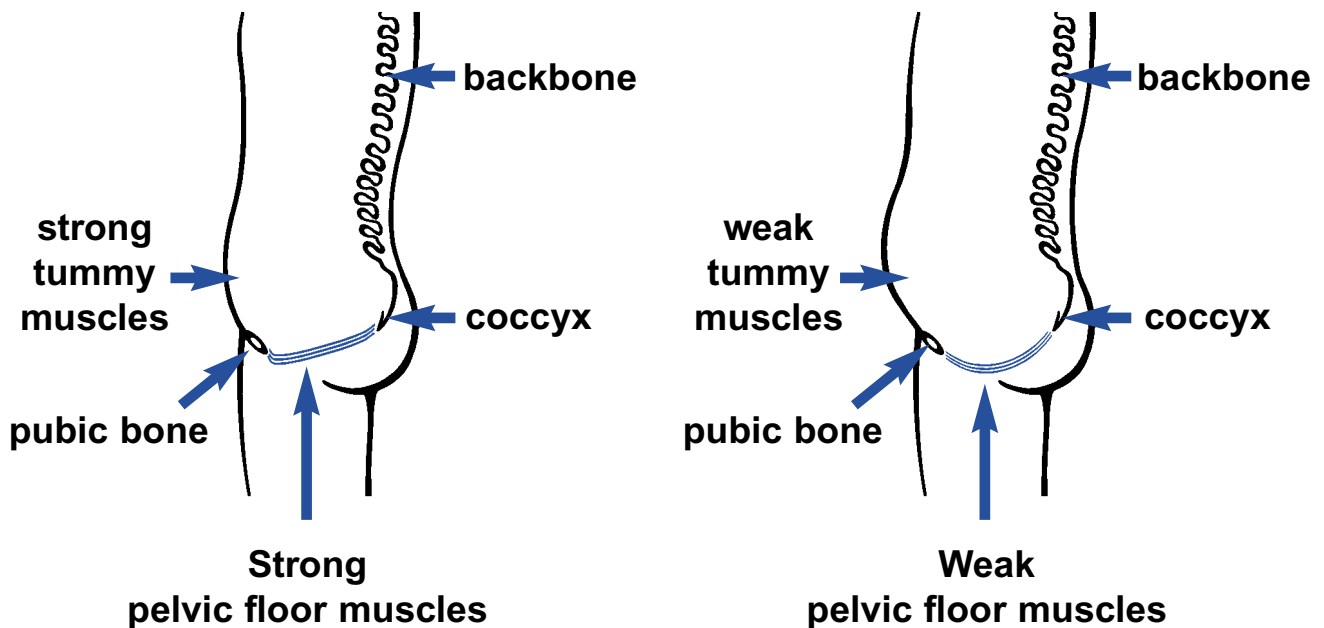
Tell the reader **how many people have this problem**. Decide who the leaflet is aimed at. Use the statistics for that group of people. The readers need to know that there are many other people with the same problem.

- Your doctor may see as many as 200 people who have problems with their bladder or bowels.
- There are about 6 million people in this country who are incontinent. They have difficulty controlling their bladder or bowels.
- 1 in 10 people in this country have problems with their bowel or bladder. It can be very embarrassing and distressing.
- 1½ million women in Britain leak urine in their underwear. This can happen when they exercise, laugh or sneeze.

Use **pictures** of happy smiling people. These can be an inspiration for people to do the exercises. They can also show other types of people who may have problems. However, pictures increase the cost of a leaflet.



Where are the pelvic floor muscles and what do they do?



Keep explanations simple without too many analogies.
Do not assume that readers have any previous knowledge.

The pelvic floor muscles are just inside your body. They are attached between the bottom of your spine (coccyx) and the bone between your legs (pubic bone). They support the bladder where urine is stored, the uterus (womb) and the bowel. These muscles help to control when you pass urine (wee) and empty your bowels (poo). The muscles should be firm and strong. If they are weak they will not provide the support and control that they should.

Why do the pelvic floor muscles not work properly?

The muscles can be damaged in many ways.

- Damage caused during pregnancy
- A chronic or smoker's cough
- After childbirth
- Lack of general fitness
- Changes due to the menopause and age
- Too much lifting of heavy things
- After prostate surgery
- A history of chronic constipation
- Being overweight

If your pelvic floor is damaged you may leak urine in your underwear when you

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|---------------------|------------------|
| cough | sneeze |
| laugh | exercise |
| blow your nose | lift or |
| get up from a chair | bend or stretch. |

Some people lose control of their bowel and leak some faeces (poo) in their underwear. Pelvic floor muscle exercises may help these people too.

The bladder, womb and bowels usually rest on the pelvic floor muscles. They may start to fall down in the pelvis if these muscles are weak. If they push against the walls of the vagina, this is called a prolapse.

How should I do pelvic floor muscle exercises?

It is essential to give clear instructions of how to do the exercises.

Too much detail or too many stages make explanations unclear.

Decide on your terminology – exercises, pull-ups, contractions or twitches?

Choose any comfortable position, with your knees slightly apart.

Tighten up your back passage as though you are trying to stop passing wind. Then tighten the muscles that you would use to stop yourself from passing urine. Do these 2 together and you should be exercising your pelvic floor muscles.

Be clear about what you should not do.

Give information on how to check that you are using the correct muscles.

It is easy to use the wrong muscles instead of the pelvic floor muscles.

Don't clench your buttocks.

Don't hold your breath.

Don't squeeze your legs together.

There are a few ways you can check that you are doing the exercises properly.

Women

- Put your fingers just inside your vagina. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles. You should feel the muscles move around your fingers.
- When you are having sex, try to exercise your pelvic floor. Ask your partner if they can feel your muscles tightening around their penis.
- Check with a mirror. Hold a small mirror so that you can see the area between your legs. Tighten the muscles. The skin between the anus and vagina should move away from the mirror.

Men

- Put your fingers on the skin just behind the scrotum (balls). Try to tighten your pelvic floor muscles. You should feel the muscles moving the skin away from your fingers.

Men and women

- You can check that you are using the correct muscles when you have a wee. Stop the flow of urine in the middle of having a wee. This is not an exercise. You should only do it once to find the correct muscles. Make sure that you empty your bladder completely after trying this.

It is very important to make sure that you are using the right muscles, otherwise there may not be any improvement. You could even cause more damage.

Ask for help if you are not sure that you are using the right muscles. A continence adviser is a nurse who can help you. There are also specialist physiotherapists. They have a lot of skills in making pelvic floor muscles stronger.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises work best when you are taught by these experts.

When you have learned the exercises, you can do them sitting, lying or standing. Try to do the exercises slow and fast.

Slow exercises Gradually tighten the muscles and hold while you count to 10.

This helps the muscles provide support for your bladder and bowel.

Fast exercises Tighten and relax the muscles quickly.

This helps the muscles to stop the urine leaking when you sneeze, laugh or exercise.

You now need to strengthen the muscles. You will need to do a pelvic floor workout.

How often and how many?

Keep this section simple and don't complicate it with too many numbers. If the reader gets confused they may stop doing the exercises.

Your pelvic floor workout Build up to doing 10 slow exercises and 10 fast exercises 4 times each day.

Pelvic floor muscles are like any other muscles. You need to practise exercising them to get to full strength. The muscles may get tired at first and it may be hard to exercise as much as this. Don't worry. The muscles will get stronger as you practise. Do as much as you can. Try to do a little more each time.

How will I know if I am getting better?

You would expect to have fewer leaks in your underwear after about 3 months of exercising. Get help if there is no improvement after 3 months.

You may need to exercise for up to 6 months before you see a full improvement.

How will I remember to do the exercises?

It can be difficult to remember to do the exercises. Suggest simple and appropriate ways to help the reader to remember but don't suggest too many.

It can be hard to remember to do your exercises. Choose something that you do about 4 times a day. Do your pelvic floor exercises every time you do this activity. For example, you could choose to do the exercises each time you switch on the kettle. Mention that strong pelvic floor muscles may improve your sex life. This could be an added incentive.

Your muscles should become stronger and you will stop leaking urine in your underwear. You must still do the workout 3 times a week for the rest of your life. If you do not, your muscles may become weak again.

How can I cope with leaks of urine while building up the strength of the muscles?

You may need to use pads while you are waiting for your muscles to get stronger. You put these in your underwear and they soak up the leaks of urine. You can buy special pads from a supermarket or from a pharmacist. There are different sorts. You throw one sort away when you have used them. The others can be washed and used again. There are also special pants (underwear) with pads already in them. For more advice about pads and other products, contact PromoCon 0161 834 2001.

'The knack' sounds old-fashioned. You should tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you cough, sneeze or lift. This can help to prevent a leak of urine in your underwear.

Be positive and encouraging but mention that some people may need more help. List other treatments and people who can offer help. If these exercises don't help, make it clear that there are other things to try.

- Vaginal weights that are put in like a tampon

- Electrical stimulation of the muscles

- Surgery

- Medicine

A specialist physiotherapist or continence adviser will know about these. In some areas other people may be able to help. They include midwives, health visitors, practice nurses or doctors.

Give information about where to get more help. A helpline number for a charity is always useful. Also give contacts for e-mail addresses and websites which may help. Some charities can give you advice and information over the phone. You can also get help by e-mail and from internet websites.

PromoCon	0161 834 2001	www.promocon@disabledliving.co.uk
Incontact	0870 770 3246	www.incontact.org
Continence Foundation	0845 345 0165	www.continence-foundation.org.uk
Tena	0158 267 7400	www.tena.co.uk

If you have to visit a specialist, you may need to answer some questions.

- How often do you pass urine?
- How often do you leak urine into your pants?
- Do you use any pads or pants to help cope with the leaks?
- When do you leak?
- What activities are you doing when you leak?
- What medicines do you take?
- What do you normally eat and drink?
- Do you feel uncomfortable when pass urine?

It is useful to include information on **healthy living**.

Look after your bladder and bowels. Try to live in a healthy way.

- Have at least 8 drinks each day (more than 3 pints). Drink more in hot weather and when exercising. Some drinks contain a lot of sugar (fizzy drinks and fruit drinks). They may make you overweight and are not good for your teeth.
- Avoid brown drinks - tea, coffee, chocolate and cola. These irritate the bladder.
- If you smoke, try to stop.
- Try to keep to a normal weight.
- Eat 5 portions of fibre every day. We get fibre from fruit, vegetables or wholemeal bread. Fibre can stop you getting constipated.
- Exercise 3 times a week for 20 minutes each time.
- Don't lift things that are too heavy for you. When you lift, keep your knees bent, your back straight and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- When you sit on the toilet, sit comfortably with your knees apart. Keep your feet on the floor and relax.
- Don't go to the toilet too often. Only go when your bladder feels full.

Women often take responsibility for the health of other people. In leaflets for women it is worth saying that men have a pelvic floor too. They can have difficulties and may benefit from help.



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