



# Stress Urinary Incontinence: Pelvic floor exercises or pessary?

## CLINICAL QUESTION

**How effective are pelvic floor exercises or pessaries for stress urinary incontinence?**

## BOTTOM LINE

**Pelvic floor exercises increase the proportion of women with symptom improvement (74% versus 11%) and patient satisfaction (71% versus 13%) compared to control over 1-6 months. Pessaries may reduce incontinence episodes compared to no treatment based on one small, 2-week study. Exercise may be slightly better than pessary at three months (example: more patients without bothersome symptoms) with less vaginal discharge at 12 months.**

## EVIDENCE

- Results statistically different unless indicated. Focusing on systematic reviews from the last 10 years.
- Pelvic floor exercises:
  - Largest systematic review, 18 randomized controlled trials (RCTs), 26-133 women, compared to no treatment/control.<sup>1</sup> At 6-24 weeks:

- Self-reported cure/improvement: 74% versus 11% (control), number needed to treat (NNT)=2.
    - Leakage (example baseline: 1-2 episodes/day):<sup>2</sup> Reduced by one episode/day over control.
    - Patient satisfaction: 71% versus 13% (control), NNT=2.
  - Other systematic reviews and newer RCTs report similar.<sup>3-9</sup>
- Pessaries:
  - Meta-analyses<sup>10-11</sup> did not combine RCTs.
  - RCT, 55 women, pessary versus no treatment.<sup>12</sup> After two weeks:
    - Total incontinence episodes reduced: 32% versus 7.6% (control).
    - Satisfaction (scale 0-100, higher=better): 60 versus 5 (control).
    - Limitations: Industry funded; baseline incontinence episodes imbalanced: 36 versus 58 (control) in two weeks before trial.
  - RCT, 446 women, pelvic floor exercises versus pessary:<sup>13</sup>
    - At 3 months:
      - Proportion without bothersome symptoms: 49% versus 33% (pessary), NNT=7.
      - Improved/much improved: Not different.
      - Satisfaction: 54% versus 50% (pessary), NNT=27.
      - Withdrawals due to adverse effects: No difference.
    - At 12 months:
      - No difference in above outcomes.
      - Vaginal discharge: 6% versus 16% (pessary), NNT=10.
    - Exercise plus pessary versus exercise alone: No difference.
    - Limitations: Pessary dropouts higher at 3 months, no different at 12 months.
  - Limitations: RCTs unblinded and outcomes often subjective.<sup>12,13</sup>

## CONTEXT

- Pelvic floor exercises considered first-line.<sup>14</sup>
  - If supervised programs inaccessible, can provide [written information](#)<sup>15</sup> or [video](#)<sup>16</sup> to patients.
  - At least 8 contractions three times daily recommended.<sup>14</sup>
- Pessaries:
  - Can last 5-10 years and be fitted in primary care.<sup>17,18</sup>
    - ~10-40% women have unsuccessful first fittings.<sup>13,19</sup>
  - Cost:<sup>17</sup> \$50-150.

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