

What happens at Pelvic Physical Therapy for women?

My name is Dr Beth Shelly and I'd like to share some information with you that is included in the book Facing Pelvic Pain: a Guide for Patients and Their Families (www.facingpelvicpain.org).

Physical therapists are experts in musculoskeletal problems - problems with the muscles the bones the joints the nerves that are in the area and the connective tissue and the skin that covers them. Pelvic physical therapists have a specialized knowledge of the pelvic structures - and the ability to train the bowel in the bladder - very important in the condition of pelvic pain.

The initial evaluation is the first visit. This includes a lot of talking. Interview questions about your symptoms, activities that are difficult or impossible, activities that make the pain better and a review of your records and previous tests. And then the physical therapist will test the pelvic structures.

These tests include a variety of items depending on your specific situation, but they would include the test of posture and movement - how is your posture in sitting; how do you stand; how do you bend forward and pick things up; what happens to the bones and the joints in the area when you bend forward. The physical therapist would also test the strength of the muscles in the trunk in the hips and how flexible they are. Muscle tenderness is often a big component of pelvic pain and that would include touching the muscles in various areas around the hips and the abdomen and the pelvic region. The function of the bladder or bowel is often of interest and that might be investigated using a bladder diary like you see here. The abdominal wall or the belly also can be involved in muscle pain and may be weakened or separated as you see here.

The pelvic floor muscle is the most specific and specialized area of the pelvic physical therapy investigation and this can be evaluated with both external and internal techniques. It is very valuable to evaluate the muscle inside the vagina and the rectum but it isn't always possible because of pain or because of your fear or worry. Please speak to the physical therapist about your concerns. On the outside of the body we can observe the area of the vagina and the rectum as you attempt to do a pelvic muscle contraction, relaxation, and then a bearing down - and the tissue should move in a certain direction. Also touching on the outside of the body can be helpful in determining whether there is muscle pain or scars or spasm.

EMG (or electromyography) is also a useful tool that can be used on the outside of the body with little sticky patches on the rectum (on the outside of the body on the skin around the rectum) and then you are positioned as you see here lying down covered up and looking at the screen with the physical therapist to determine if the muscle is able to relax well or contract well.

Some physical therapists also have a tool called imaging ultrasound - similar to the baby ultrasound - we can see the bladder filled with urine as a black circle and the pelvic floor muscle under it and then as you attempt to contract or relax we'll see the muscle move (or not). This transducer is usually placed just above the pubic bone on the belly or on the outside of the body at the entrance to the vagina.

As I said there are internal techniques as well and these are very helpful in determining exactly what's going on with the pelvic floor muscle, touching with the physical therapist's finger inside the vagina and/or the rectum. There also are internal EMG techniques most physical therapists do not have stirrups and do not use speculums so you can be relaxed in that regard.

Preparing for your first visit is helpful for the therapist and bringing your previous records helps the therapist to be able to more quickly get to where your concerns are. Complete the questionnaires that the physical therapist asks you to complete ahead of time and think carefully about what makes your pain worse and what makes your pain better. Comfortable clothes are also important so that you can move and stretch and remove them easily for the evaluation of the muscles.

Many patients are concerned about whether the examination will be painful. And please remember that the goal for physical therapy is to decrease your pain, not create pain. Sometimes the tests may be mildly uncomfortable but it is important to discuss that with your physical therapist. Tell the physical therapist when you have pain or discomfort or when you're worried discuss your concerns ahead. You are in charge.

I hope this short video has helped you to understand a little bit about what physical therapy might include when you are evaluated for pelvic pain.