WHAT IS A VAGINAL (OR PELVIC ORGAN) PROLAPSE?

Your pelvic organs include your bladder, uterus (womb) and rectum (back passage). These organs are held in place by tissues called “fascia” and “ligaments”. These tissues help to join your pelvic organs to the bony side walls of the pelvis and hold them inside your pelvis. Your pelvic floor muscles also hold up your pelvic organs from below. If the fascia and ligaments are torn or stretched for any reason, and if your pelvic floor muscles are weak, then your pelvic organs (your bladder, uterus, or rectum) might not be held in their right place and they may bulge down into the vagina (birth canal).

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF PROLAPSE?

There are a few signs that you may have a prolapse. These signs depend on the type of prolapse and how much pelvic organ support has been lost. Early on, you may not know you have a prolapse, but your doctor or nurse might be able to see your prolapse when you have your routine Pap test.

When a prolapse is further down, you may notice things such as:

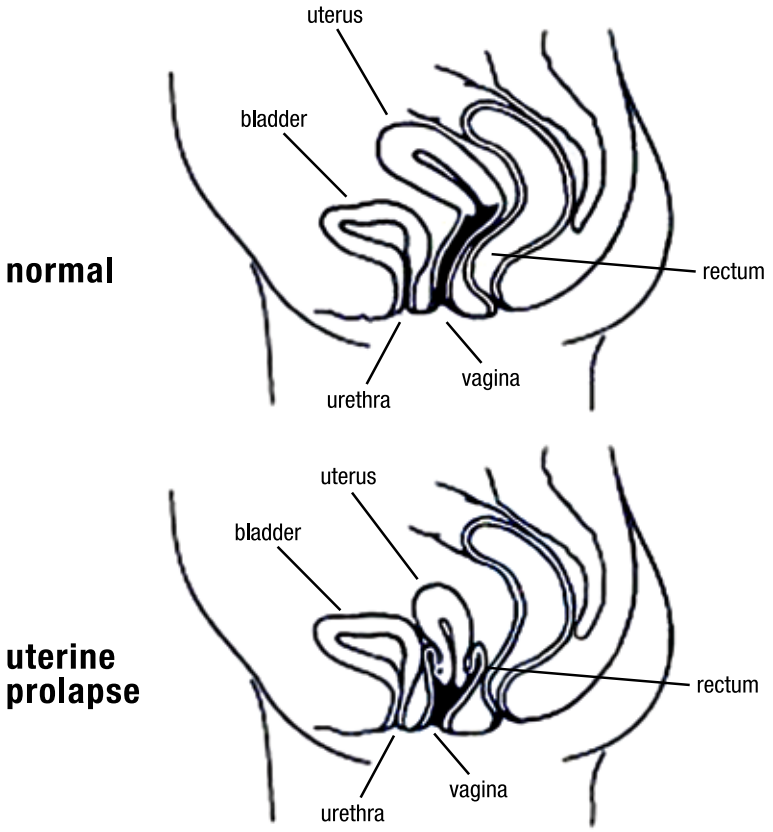
- a heavy feeling or dragging in the vagina;
- something ‘coming down’ or a lump in the vagina;
- a lump bulging out of your vagina, which you see or feel when you are in the shower or having a bath;
- sexual problems of pain or less feeling;
- your bladder might not empty as it should, or your urine stream might be weak;
- urinary tract infections might keep coming back; or
- it might be hard for you to empty your bowel.

These signs can be worse at the end of the day and may feel better after lying down. If the prolapse bulges right outside your body, you may feel sore and bleed as the prolapse rubs on your underwear.

WHAT CAUSES PROLAPSE?

The pelvic organs are held inside the pelvis by strong healthy fascia. They are held up from below by pelvic floor muscles that work like a firm muscle sling. If the support tissues (fascia and ligaments) that keep the bladder, uterus and bowel in place inside the pelvis are weak or damaged, or if the pelvic floor muscles are weak and saggy, then prolapse can happen.

Childbirth is the main cause of prolapse. On the way down the vagina, the baby can stretch and tear the support tissues and the pelvic floor muscles. The more vaginal births you have, the more likely you are to have a prolapse.



Other things that press down on the pelvic organs and the pelvic floor muscles that can lead to prolapse, are:

- coughing that goes on for a while (such as smoker's cough or asthma);
- heavy lifting; and
- constipation and straining to empty the bowel.

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TYPES OF PROLAPSE.

Pelvic organs may bulge through the front wall of the vagina (called a cystocele [sist-o-seal]), through the back vaginal wall (called a rectocele [rec-to-seal] or an enterocele (enter-o-seal]) or the uterus may drop down into your vagina (uterine prolapse). More than one organ may bulge into the vagina.

WHO IS LIKELY TO HAVE A PROLAPSE?

Prolapse tends to run in families. It is more likely after menopause or if you are overweight. But it can happen in young women right after having a baby.

- It is thought that half of all women who have had a child have some level of pelvic organ prolapse, but only one in five women seek help.
- Prolapse can also happen in women who haven't had a baby, mainly if they cough, strain on the toilet, or lift heavy loads.
- Even after surgery to mend prolapse, one in three women will prolapse again.
- Prolapse can also happen in women who have had their womb removed (that is, had a hysterectomy). In a case like this, the top of the vagina (the vault) can prolapse.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP PREVENT PROLAPSE?

It is much better to prevent prolapse than try to fix it! If any women in your close family have had a prolapse, you are more at risk and you need to try very hard to follow the advice given here.

As prolapse is due to weak pelvic tissues and pelvic floor muscles, you need to keep your pelvic floor muscles strong no matter what your age.

Pelvic floor muscles can be made stronger with proper training (See the brochure "Pelvic Floor Muscle Training for Women"). It is important to have your pelvic floor muscle training checked by an expert such as a pelvic floor physiotherapist or a continence nurse advisor. If you have been told you have a prolapse, these experts are the best people to help plan a pelvic floor muscle training program to suit your needs.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO TREAT PROLAPSE ONCE IT HAS HAPPENED?

Prolapse can be dealt with **simply** or with **surgery**—it depends on the level of prolapse.

The simple approach

Prolapse can often be treated without surgery, chiefly in the early stages, and when the prolapse is mild. The simple approach can mean:

- pelvic floor muscle training planned to your special needs, with the advice of a pelvic floor physiotherapist or continence nurse advisor;
- learning what caused your prolapse, and making needed lifestyle changes;
- keeping good bowel and bladder habits to avoid straining (see the brochure "Good Bladder Habits for Everyone"); and
- having a pessary (a plastic or rubber device that fits into your vagina) carefully measured and placed into the vagina to provide inside support for your pelvic organs (a bit like a prop) rather than surgery.

The surgery approach

Surgery can be done to repair the torn or stretched fascia and ligaments. Surgery can be done through the vagina or the tummy. Sometimes special mesh is placed into the front or the back vaginal wall to strengthen it where it is weak or torn. As the body heals, the mesh helps form stronger tissues to give more support where it is needed.

After surgery

To prevent the prolapse coming back again, you should make sure you:

- have expert training to make sure your pelvic floor muscles work to support your pelvic organs;
- don't strain when using your bowels (see the brochure "Good Bladder Habits for Everyone");
- keep your weight within the right range for your height and age;
- learn safe ways of lifting, including sharing the lifting of heavy loads;
- see your doctor if you have a cough that won't go away; and
- see your doctor if simple things don't seem to make it better.

The diagrams have been reprinted with kind permission from Women's Health Queensland Wide's Genital Prolapse factsheet. **www.womhealth.org.au**

SEEK HELP

Prolapse is common. It won't go away if you ignore it, and help is available. For best results seek help from your doctor, physiotherapist, or continence nurse advisor who will advise you on the best way to deal with prolapse, just for you.

If you have any questions about prolapse or about bladder and bowel control, you can contact:

Expert Advisors on the National Continence Helpline for free:

- information;
- advice; and
- leaflets.

On FREECALL 1800 33 00 66 (8 am to 8 pm Monday to Friday), or

Visit the website: www.bladderbowel.gov.au

The Helpline can arrange for an interpreter through the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS). Please ring 13 14 50 Monday to Friday and ask for the Helpline.

Don't ignore the signs of prolapse. Seek help.

* Calls from mobile telephones are charged at applicable rates.