

Ladies, at last you can get back on the trampoline

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Getty Images

Having a weak pelvic floor is no longer taboo, says Peta Bee, and it's possible to reverse

Trust Kate Winslet to open the floodgates. The pelvic floor wasn't a topic that cropped up much in conversation, let alone on national television, until the Oscar-winning actress confessed on *The Graham Norton Show* last autumn that she wets herself.


"When you've had a few children, you know, it's just what happens," she said. "It's amazing. Two sneezes, I'm fine; three, it's game over." As for joining her kids on the trampoline, "It's bloody awful, especially if you are wearing a skirt."


Winslet's honesty struck a chord with Julie Walters, a fellow guest on the show, who chipped in with her own complaint about the trampoline issues she suffered while shooting the Burberry Christmas ad. "It was terribly embarrassing, saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' looking terribly ungainly trying to get off the trampoline all while dressed head to toe in Burberry."

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And now here I am interviewing Jo Wood when her 37-year-old daughter, Leah, chimes in about her own experiences of "weeing when I jumped a bit too hard on the trampoline" with her two children. She and her mother are ambassadors for Innovo, a new gadget designed to remedy the problem.

It's a strange subject to be discussing over freshly baked croissants in the Kit Kemp-designed Terrace Suite of Soho's fashionable Ham Yard Hotel, yet it's undoubtedly an experience to which many women will relate, me included. I thought I'd escaped childbirth relatively unscathed until after attempting to out-jump the kids on a pogo stick I had to retreat indoors discreetly.

Leah's mum, Jo, looks every inch the original rock chick as she reclines into a luxurious sofa. She is wearing black leather trousers, has smoky eyes and heavily fringed blonde hair and, despite the years spent partying with the Rolling Stones guitarist Ronnie Wood, to whom she was married from 1985 to 2011, could easily pass for a decade younger than her 60 years. All the glamour, though, does not make her immune from an under-toned pelvic floor. "I cough or sneeze and a little bit of pee comes out," she admits. "It's all because of my pelvic floor."

Wood says that carrying three children weakened her internal muscles and that she is on a mission to rebuild them. "We British are so tight-lipped about discussing our private bits. My own mum never mentioned how important the pelvic floor was apart from telling me to do a few exercises, and it's not something I'd ever discuss with my girlfriends until now."

Had she done so earlier, she would probably have discovered just how many of her friends were also afflicted. An estimated one in three UK women — and one in ten men — suffers from bladder weakness. For the women this is triggered not only by having children, but by the menopause, illness, stress and other factors. One recent study suggested that 23 per cent of all females take time off work because of their "incontinence issues" so perhaps it should be unsurprising that so many celebrities are now obsessing as much about their pelvic muscles as they are about those in their core or their buttocks.

Gwyneth Paltrow, a mother of two, is one of those who recognises that the group of muscles, which forms a sort of hammock for your internal organs, is just as much in need of strengthening as any other. On her lifestyle website, Goop, she posted an article advising readers to strengthen them by various bizarre means including squatting to pee in the shower. "When you squat to pee as opposed to sitting up straight on the toilet, you automatically engage your pelvic floor and it naturally stretches and tones," it explained.

Lack of tone in the floor muscles not only weakens the control you have over your bladder and bowels, but can reduce sexual performance and affect posture by shunting the hips off kilter. "It's a hugely important aspect of health that's remained overlooked for too long," says

Dr Julian Spinks, a Kent-based GP and medical adviser to the Association for Continence Advice. "Weakened pelvic muscles can occur in teenagers, men, women of all ages — and you are not immune if you have a caesarean — and the seemingly fittest and healthiest of people; 10 per cent of sporty women stop exercising because they leak urine as a result. Only now celebrities are talking about it has awareness gone mainstream."

With its profile catapulted, it's hardly surprising to find a myriad of new gadgets, workouts and personal trainers specialising in "floor reconstruction", and a range of gym wear that promises to help to restore the inner musculature to its former glory. Exercise can indeed help at any age, but only if it targets those internal muscles correctly.

For all it shouts about activating the pelvic floor muscles, traditional Pilates may not, in fact, be the best approach. Jane Wake, a trainer who specialises

in pelvic muscle workouts for men and women that are approved by the Royal College of Midwives, says it can be counterproductive.

"Your pelvic floor is under more stress than any other muscle group in the body, but you need to work it in a functional way and not in isolation," she says. "I'm very anti-regular Pilates as it gets you to lie down and focus on your pelvic floor without paying attention to the way it works with the rest of your body. And there's a lot of effort in 'engaging' the muscles, but no emphasis on releasing them, which is equally important."

One alternative is kegel exercisers, named after the American gynaecologist who discovered the importance of repeatedly contracting and relaxing the pelvic muscles. They come in every size and shape imaginable and are designed to be inserted in the vagina — the equivalent of kettlebells for your lady parts. Some look odd, others downright uncomfortable, but the latest are said to be so discreet they can be worn while you are in meetings (although that's debatable given the inevitable eyebrow-raising and grimacing that occurs when your workout focus switches down below).

Gadgets such as Elvie, an egg-shaped "insertable" with a tail that curves around the outside of the vulva to hold it in place, and the US-produced kGoal, double up as a Fitbit for your vagina, providing feedback about how hard you are squeezing via an embedded Bluetooth that connects to your phone. With Elvie, there are daily exercises such as a "lift, hold and drop the 'ball'" move, another that requires you to pulse repeatedly and one that commands you to squeeze as hard as you can. The smartphone apps assesses progress based on the improving strength of your pelvic muscles, with the results posted to a chart on your screen.

If your eyes are watering at that, then vaginal kung fu is probably not for you. Kim Anami, a Los Angeles gynaecological trainer, offers an online vaginal kung fu course that focuses on "strengthening the core and other supporting muscles". She tells us this because her website features images of her lifting weights with her vaginal muscles. Ouch.

“Having a strong pelvic floor and vaginal muscles helps with everything from increasing libido, orgasmic potential and lubrication, eliminating incontinence and preventing pelvic organ prolapse, especially after childbirth,” she says. Sign up, as I did, for her video tutorials and your horizons widen to a world in which “the normal, healthy baseline for every woman is to be able to shoot ping pong balls from her vagina”. I can’t say I got that far, to be honest, but persevere for the eight weeks she recommends and it must have some effect — her online kung fu salons are booked out until January 2017.

There are, thankfully, less hardcore methods of internal gym work. Both Winslet and the Woods have the gold-standard floor-worker, the Innovo. This device was launched in the UK this month and works rather like a Slendertone machine in targeting those muscles you can’t quite reach on the weights machine at the gym. It’s not cheap (£249.99), although it’s so effective that French and German women get it free from their doctor after childbirth.

Compared with other options, it’s something of a cheat’s way to get results — pull on the neoprene leg-wraps, lie back and let the device do your floor exercises for you, pumping out 180 “perfect” contractions per session. Jo Woods describes it as “a pleasant sort of tingling” — I find it more like an attack of pins and needles that becomes gradually more ferocious the further you turn the dial.

Still, it is worth the mild discomfort. Clinical trials showed leakage problems were cured in 86 per cent of users after 12 weeks. Not to be sneezed at, ladies, until you’ve tried it.

Five ways to restore your floor

1 Innovo (£249)

Think Slendertone for your pelvic floor. This device has the most weighty scientific backing and is available free to women in France and Germany.

2 Elvie (£149; elvie.com)

An internal pelvic floor strengthening device with in-built fitness tracker that provides interactive feedback to show you have located those kegels.

3 EVB clothing (from £45.00; evbsport.com)

A range of engineer-designed gym wear that is designed to support the core and pelvic muscles during exercise.

4 PeriCoach (£145; pericoach.com)

One of only a few products to be a registered medical device that is medically approved to help with the “correction of urinary incontinence”. It’s another internal device with three bio-sensors that give visual and audio feedback to ensure that you are exercising correctly.

5 Vaginal Kung Fu (kimanami.com)

Video tutorials are free and Kim Anami also holds kung fu salons twice a year.