

HOW TO FIND YOUR BULBOCAVERNOSUS MUSCLE



Every vagina has a sphincter, called the bulbocavernosus muscle. When the bulbocavernosus muscle is working fine, you don't even know it's there. When it is not working properly, the bulbocavernosus tightens up, leading to a condition called "vaginismus." Vaginismus can make vaginal sex painful. **This self-care exercise can help you get to know your bulbocavernosus muscle.** Practicing this exercise will help teach your brain and your vaginal sphincter muscle to communicate better, which can help make vaginal sex easier.

DISCLAIMER: *This is not medical advice. This is a self-care activity. If at any time you feel discomfort, stop immediately. If you think you have vaginismus, talk to your health care provider.*

Get to know your bulbocavernosus muscle

Before getting started, here's what you'll need:

- Comfortable, private place to lie down
- Hand mirror
- Vaginal lubricant (coconut, vegetable, or olive oil all work)
- Pillow(s)
- Finger-sized vaginal dilator, dildo, vibrator, or tampon with rounded applicator
- A finger works too!

1. Wash your hands with regular soap and water.
2. Lie down and make "frog legs" (feet touching, knees wide apart). Place pillow(s) under your bottom to prop yourself up.
3. Point the mirror at your vulva so you can see it from your lying-down, frog legs position.
4. While looking in the mirror at your vulva, **bear down** on your bulbocavernosus muscle.

NOTE: When you bear down, you should see a slight bulge toward the mirror, and the vaginal opening should open up a little bit.

5. If you can bear down and see the vaginal opening, move on to the next step. If you are having trouble bearing down, stop the exercise here and practice bearing down.

NOTE: Often times, when the brain tells the bulbocavernosus muscle to "bear down," the muscle actually squeezes up and in. Looking in the mirror will help you see if this is occurring.

Practice Bearing Down

To practice bearing down on your bulbocavernosus muscle, imagine you are trying to **push something out of your vagina**. If you like, imagine that you are laying an egg, or delivering a baby! If you can't bear down, think about this muscle next time you bear down to have a bowel movement.

6. Apply some lubricant to your finger or the object you are using.
7. WHILE BEARING DOWN, insert your finger or the object into the vagina. Keep bearing down to keep the bulbocavernosus sphincter open while you are inserting the finger or object.

NOTE: Once you pass your finger or the object past the bulbocavernosus muscle, you may feel like you are “over the ridge” or “over the hump” or “past the wall,” and you will probably feel a decrease in resistance from your vagina.

8. Once you pass the bulbocavernosus muscle, you can STOP BEARING DOWN but keep your finger or the object where it is. You may even be able to insert it further.
9. Breathe. Think about how this feels. Notice your anatomy.
10. Now, without using your hand to help it, **bear down** to push your finger or the object out of your vagina (this is where a finger is less helpful than the other options).

NOTE: Almost always, this is a EUREKA! moment. This is where you can prove to yourself that your vagina has a sphincter! The bulbocavernosus muscle is real! And your brain can control it! And you might just say to yourself: “OMG.” “Well I’ll be damned.” “Why did nobody ever tell me that my vagina has a sphincter?”

If you can’t do this exercise because you can’t bear down or insert the object or finger, it’s OK! The next thing to do is call your health care provider and get checked out. You might be a candidate for pelvic floor physical therapy, or need some estrogen in your vagina for post-menopausal dryness. You might benefit from information about moisturizers, dilators or even a change in birth control.

A few last tips:

- This information is also helpful for teaching someone how to use a tampon
- You can use the bearing down technique during a gynecologic exam when the doctor puts in a speculum or examines you with her fingers
- You can use the bearing down technique during intercourse. Bearing down on your bulbocavernosus muscle will help ease vaginal penetration.

For more information about the bulbocavernosus muscle, visit www.womanlab.org.

For more information about female sexual function in the context of cancer, visit www.womanlab.org, and connect:



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WeAreWomanLab



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Important professional organizations recommend that doctors talk to women with cancer about sexual function:

National Comprehensive Cancer Network (www.nccn.org)

National Cancer Institute (www.cancer.gov)

The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
(www.acog.org)

Society of Gynecologic Oncology (www.sgo.org)

Scientific Network for Female Sexual Health and Cancer
(www.cancersexnetwork.org)