

## THE DANGEROUS DOWNSIDE OF SIT-UPS: TACKLING INCONTINENCE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE FITNESS INDUSTRY

### Hypothesis / aims of study

Inappropriate exercise is one of the many factors which can damage the pelvic floor muscles. 'Weakness of the pelvic floor can result from straining to open the bowel, excess body weight, inappropriate exercise, poor posture, prolonged or frequent coughing, repeated heavy lifting, connective tissue disease or previous pelvic surgery'. (1)

Pelvic Floor First is a joint collaboration between the continence and fitness industries in Australia and aims to reduce the number of men and women who experience pelvic floor dysfunction as a result of inappropriate exercise regimes. The campaign has been developed in collaboration with Australia's leading Continence and Women's Health Physiotherapists and world renowned Fitness Leaders.

This aim is supported by the following objectives:

1. Empower and equip fitness professionals to identify people at high-risk of pelvic floor problems, modify their exercise program, and refer them to the appropriate health professional.
2. Encourage continence health professionals and fitness professionals to establish links for inter-referral of clients.
3. Raise awareness among women about the key-risk factors for pelvic floor dysfunction, and types of exercises which can exacerbate the condition.

### Study design, materials and methods

Collaborative partnerships between the health and fitness sectors were fundamental to the success of the project, which adopted a multifaceted approach including upstream and midstream strategies. A range of educational materials were developed including an online course, microsite and a speaker's kit.

The stigma of incontinence was identified as a barrier for the project, and a distinct brand was developed to overcome this. A communication strategy was developed and included a range of communication channels including online (social media), television, print and face to face presentations.

### Results

- Partnerships developed with professional registration bodies including Fitness Australia and Kinect Australia.
- Successful lobbying of the National Fitness Industry Training Package to include women's health and pelvic floor information in training of new fitness professionals.
- Recruitment of clinical and non-clinical ambassadors to promote the key messages of the campaign locally, nationally and internationally.
- Over 1000 subscriptions to the Pelvic Floor First e-newsletter through the microsite from fitness professionals, health professionals and consumers.
- Representation at national and international conferences and forums promoting the key messages of Pelvic Floor First.
- Adoption of the campaign by the New Zealand Continence Association.

### Interpretation of results

The campaign received recognition from the International Continence Society in 2011 via the World Continence Week award system, highlighting the successful and innovative nature of this campaign. Findings demonstrate that the project is inducing attitudinal and behavioural change as demonstrated by increased:

- enquiries to the National Continence Helpline
- visits to the Pelvic Floor First microsite
- requests for face-to-face presentations in gyms, and
- e-subscriptions to the project.

### Concluding message

Pelvic Floor First has been a highly successful campaign that has engaged fitness professionals, health professionals and consumers Australia wide. Further results from the project will be discussed in the full paper. It is anticipated that over time the number of men and women experiencing pelvic floor dysfunction as a result of inappropriate exercise regimes will decrease and that all fitness professionals will provide at risk clients with pelvic floor safe programs.

### References

1. O'Dwyer, M 2009, Hold it Sister: the confident girl's guide to a leak-free life, RedSok Publishing, Queensland.

### Disclosures

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**Clinical Trial:** No **Subjects:** NONE