

Impact of Pelvic Floor Muscle Training on Primary Dysmenorrhea

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Abstract: ***Background:** Primary dysmenorrhea (PD), characterized by painful menstruation without underlying pathology, affects a vast majority of menstruating women, significantly impairing their quality of life. Current pharmacological treatments, while effective, can have side effects. Pelvic floor muscle training (PFMT) has shown promise in managing various pelvic pain conditions, but its specific impact on PD remains under-researched. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of a structured PFMT program in reducing pain intensity, duration, and associated symptoms in women with primary dysmenorrhea. **Methods:** This single-blinded, randomized controlled trial will recruit 160 women aged 18-30 years with primary dysmenorrhea (VAS \ 5/10). Participants will be randomly allocated to either a PFMT group (n=80) or a Control Group (n=80). The PFMT group will receive a 12-week supervised program (3 sessions/week) incorporating slow and fast contractions, functional training, and real-time ultrasound biofeedback, along with a daily home exercise program. The Control Group will receive general health education. Primary outcome will be pain intensity (VAS score) during menstruation. Secondary outcomes include pain duration, analgesic use, quality of life (SF-36), and menstrual distress (MDQ). Assessments will be conducted at baseline, 3 months, and 6 months (3-month post-intervention follow-up). Data analysed using repeated measures ANOVA. **Results:** We hypothesize that the PFMT group will demonstrate a significant reduction in pain intensity and duration, decreased analgesic consumption, and improved quality of life compared to the control group. **Conclusion:** This study seeks to provide robust evidence for PFMT as a safe, non-pharmacological, and empowering physiotherapy rehabilitation option for women with primary dysmenorrhea, potentially offering a valuable alternative to conventional treatments.*

Keywords: Primary dysmenorrhea, pelvic floor muscle training, physiotherapy, pain management, women's health

1. Introduction

Primary dysmenorrhea (PD) is a prevalent gynaecological condition affecting a substantial proportion of women in their reproductive years. Characterized by cramping pain in the lower abdomen during menstruation in the absence of identifiable pelvic pathology, PD often disrupts daily activities, academic performance, and professional productivity, leading to a diminished quality of life (Proctor & Farquhar, 2006). The pain, which can radiate to the back and thighs, is frequently accompanied by systemic symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, fatigue, and headaches.¹

The underlying mechanism of PD involves the excessive production and release of prostaglandins, particularly prostaglandin F_{2α} (PGF_{2α}), from the endometrial cells during the menstrual cycle. These prostaglandins stimulate strong and uncoordinated uterine contractions, leading to uterine ischemia and subsequent pain (ACOG, 2015). While non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and hormonal contraceptives are standard pharmacological treatments for PD, their use may be associated with side effects, and some women may prefer non-pharmacological interventions due to personal preference, contraindications, or insufficient symptom relief.²

Physiotherapy, as a non-invasive and drug-free approach, has garnered increasing attention in the management of various

chronic pain conditions. Among the diverse physiotherapy modalities, pelvic floor muscle training (PFMT), commonly known as Kegel exercises, has traditionally been recognized for its efficacy in addressing urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse (Bernhardt, 2018). However, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting its potential role in ameliorating pelvic pain syndromes.²

The theoretical rationale for PFMT's beneficial effects on primary dysmenorrhea is multifaceted:

Improved Local Circulation: Rhythmic contraction and relaxation of the pelvic floor muscles may enhance blood flow to the pelvic organs, including the uterus. This increased circulation could facilitate the removal of pain-inducing inflammatory mediators like prostaglandins, thereby reducing uterine ischemia and pain (Wallace & Maxwell, 2019).

Reduced Muscle Hypertonicity: The pelvic floor muscles can become hypertonic or develop trigger points in response to chronic pain or stress, contributing to pelvic discomfort. PFMT, when performed correctly, can help to normalize muscle tone, release tension, and improve the flexibility and coordination of the pelvic diaphragm (Sigmarsson et al., 2020).

Neuromodulation and Pain Perception: The activation of pelvic floor muscles may modulate pain pathways through

Volume 14 Issue 9, September 2025

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

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segmental inhibition mechanisms, potentially altering the central nervous system's processing of pain signals (Chen & Chen, 2014).

Enhanced Body Awareness: Engaging in PFMT encourages greater proprioceptive awareness of the pelvic region, empowering women to recognize and actively manage their pelvic sensations and symptoms.

Despite these plausible mechanisms and preliminary studies suggesting the benefits of exercise for dysmenorrhea (Smith et al., 2021), the specific role and efficacy of structured PFMT protocols in the context of primary dysmenorrhea warrant further rigorous investigation. This randomized controlled trial aims to fill this knowledge gap by assessing the impact of a comprehensive PFMT program on the core symptoms of primary dysmenorrhea, including pain intensity, duration, and associated impacts on daily life and quality of life.

2. Research Methodology

This study will be a single-blinded, parallel-group,

Study Setting and Participants:

The study will be conducted at a physiotherapy outpatient department and affiliated health centers in Maharashtra, India.

Sample Size: A power analysis, based on a presumed moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.5$) for pain reduction (VAS) and assuming an alpha of 0.05 and a power of 0.80, indicates a requirement of approximately 64 participants per group. To account for potential attrition of up to 20%, we aim to recruit a total of 160 participants (80 per group).³

Recruitment: Participants will be recruited through advertisements in local university health centers, college campuses, and community clinics in Maharashtra.

Eligibility Criteria:

Inclusion Criteria:

- Females aged 18-30 years.
- Diagnosis of primary dysmenorrhea for at least six consecutive menstrual cycles, confirmed by a gynaecologist.
- Regular menstrual cycles (21-35 days).
- Average pain intensity of as 5/10 on a 10-point Visual Analog Scale (VAS) during the first 3 days of at least two consecutive menstrual cycles prior to enrolment.
- No known organic pelvic pathology (e. g., endometriosis, fibroids, pelvic inflammatory disease, adenomyosis) confirmed by medical history and recent transvaginal ultrasound.
- Not pregnant or breastfeeding.
- No use of hormonal contraceptives or intrauterine devices (IUDs) within the past 3 months.
- No regular use of NSAIDs or other analgesics for more than 3 days per cycle.

- Ability to understand and follow instructions in Marathi or English.
- Willingness to participate and provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Presence of secondary dysmenorrhea due to confirmed organic causes.
- Diagnosed neurological or significant musculoskeletal conditions affecting the pelvic floor, lower back, or lower limbs that could interfere with PFMT.
- Currently receiving or having received physiotherapy for pelvic pain within the last 6 months.
- History of pelvic or abdominal surgery within the last 6 months.
- Any medical condition contraindicating physical exercise.

Randomization and Blinding:

Randomization: After successful screening and baseline assessment, eligible participants will be randomly assigned to either the Pelvic Floor Muscle Training (PFMT) group or the Control Group. A computer-generated random sequence using permuted blocks of varying sizes will be created by an independent statistician. The randomization sequence will be concealed from researchers involved in participant recruitment and baseline data collection.

Blinding: Participants will be informed that they are part of a study investigating different approaches to menstrual pain management, thus being single-blinded to their specific group assignment. The physiotherapist delivering the PFMT intervention cannot be blinded due to the nature of the treatment. However, all outcome assessors and data analysts will be rigorously blinded to group allocation to minimize detection bias.

Interventions:

The intervention period will span 12 weeks, followed by a 3-month post-intervention follow-up.

Pelvic Floor Muscle Training (PFMT) Group:

Participants in this group will undergo a structured, individualized PFMT program supervised by a physiotherapist specializing in women's health.

Initial Assessment: A thorough pelvic floor assessment will be conducted for each participant to determine their current pelvic floor muscle strength, endurance, and coordination. This will involve digital palpation using the Modified Oxford Scale (MOS 0-5) and real-time ultrasound (RTUS) biofeedback to visually confirm correct muscle activation (e. g., lift of the bladder neck, absence of accessory muscle contraction).⁴

Supervised Training Sessions:

Frequency: 3 sessions per week for 12 weeks.

Duration: Each supervised session will be approximately 45 minutes.

Education: Detailed education on pelvic anatomy, the function of pelvic floor muscles, the mechanisms of dysmenorrhea, and the role of PFMT in pain management.

Technique Instruction: Meticulous instruction on correct pelvic floor muscle contraction and relaxation, emphasizing the "lift and squeeze" action without engaging gluteal, adductor, or abdominal muscles. RTUS biofeedback will be extensively used in early sessions to ensure proper technique and provide visual feedback for motor learning.

Exercise Progression:

Slow Contractions (Endurance): Participants will be instructed to slowly contract the pelvic floor muscles, lifting them upwards and inwards, holding the contraction for 5-10 seconds, followed by an equal rest period. Initially, 5 repetitions, progressing to 10-15 repetitions as strength improves.

Fast Contractions (Power): Participants will perform quick, strong contractions of the pelvic floor muscles, immediately followed by relaxation. Initially, 10 repetitions, progressing to 15-20 repetitions.

Functional Training: Integration of PFMT into daily activities, such as bracing the pelvic floor before coughing, sneezing, or lifting light objects.

Relaxation Techniques: Instruction on diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation to complement PFMT and promote overall relaxation.

Home Exercise Program: Participants will receive a detailed written and pictorial home exercise program, along with a log sheet to record their daily practice. They will be advised to perform 3 sets of 10-15 slow contractions and 3 sets of 15-20 fast contractions daily, reinforced during supervised sessions. Adherence will be monitored through log sheets and weekly check-ins.

Control Group:

Participants in the control group will receive general health education regarding menstrual hygiene, the importance of a balanced diet, adequate sleep, and general stress management techniques. They will be explicitly instructed not to engage in any specific pelvic floor exercises or other structured physical therapy interventions for dysmenorrhea during the study period. They will be informed that they may receive PFMT instruction after the study period if the intervention proves beneficial.

Outcome Measures:

All outcome measures will be assessed at baseline (T0), after 3 months of intervention (T1), and at 6 months (T2-3 months post-intervention follow-up). Pain-related outcomes will be collected during the first 3 days of the menstrual cycle.

Primary Outcome Measure:

Pain Intensity: Assessed using a 10-point Visual Analog Scale (VAS), where 0 indicates "no pain" and 10 indicates "worst possible pain." Participants will record their average pain intensity during the first 3 days of menstruation.

Secondary Outcome Measures:

Pain Duration: Recorded as the number of days per menstrual cycle experiencing dysmenorrhea pain.

Analgesic Use: Measured by the number of analgesic tablets (e. g., NSAIDs) consumed per menstrual cycle.

Dysmenorrhea Impact on Daily Activities: Assessed using the Menstrual Distress Questionnaire (MDQ). The MDQ quantifies the severity of various menstrual symptoms and their interference with daily activities (e. g., concentration, social interaction, work/school performance).

Quality of Life (QoL): Measured using the SF-36 Health Survey, a widely validated generic health status questionnaire that assesses physical and mental health components.

Pelvic Floor Muscle Strength (PFMS): Objectively assessed by a blinded physiotherapist using digital palpation (Modified Oxford Scale 0-5) at T0, T1, and T2. This provides a quantifiable measure of muscle improvement.

Pelvic Floor Muscle Endurance (PFME): Measured as the maximal sustained contraction time (in seconds) of the pelvic floor muscles while maintaining correct technique, also assessed by the blinded physiotherapist.

Data Collection and Management:

Data was collected by trained research assistants who are blinded to participant group allocation. All questionnaires and measurements will be standardized. Data will be meticulously entered into a secure, password-protected electronic database (e. g., REDCap or equivalent). Participant confidentiality will be strictly maintained throughout the study, with each participant assigned a unique study ID.

Ethical Considerations:

This study protocol will be submitted to and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Maharashtra. All participants will receive comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits before providing written informed consent. Participants will be explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or affecting their routine medical care. The study will be conducted in strict accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

3. Data Analysis and Results

Statistical Analysis:

Software: All statistical analyses was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows,

Baseline Characteristics: Descriptive statistics (mean \pm standard deviation for continuous variables; frequencies and percentages for categorical variables) was used to summarize baseline demographic and clinical characteristics of both groups. Independent t-tests (for continuous data) or Chi-square tests (for categorical data) was employed to compare baseline characteristics and ensure the groups are comparable.

Primary Outcome Analysis (Pain Intensity): A two-way repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the main effects of "Group" (PFMT vs. Control), "Time" (T0, T1, T2), and their interaction (Group x Time) on VAS pain scores. This will determine if the changes in pain intensity over time differ significantly between the two groups. If a significant interaction effect is observed, post-hoc analyses (e. g., Bonferroni correction) will be performed to identify specific time points and group differences.⁵

Secondary Outcome Analysis: Similar two-way repeated measures ANOVA or appropriate non-parametric alternatives (e. g., Mann-Whitney U test for between-group comparisons at each time point, Wilcoxon signed-rank test for within-group changes) will be used for continuous secondary outcomes (Pain Duration, Analgesic Use, SF-36 scores, PFMS, PFME). For categorical outcomes (e. g., specific MDQ components), Chi-square tests or logistic regression models may be applied.

Intention-to-Treat Analysis: An intention-to-treat (ITT) approach will be used for all primary analyses, meaning participants was analysed in their originally assigned groups regardless of their adherence to the intervention or withdrawal. Missing data will be handled using appropriate imputation techniques, such as multiple imputation, to maximize statistical power and minimize bias.⁶

Clinical Significance: Beyond statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), the clinical relevance of the findings will be evaluated by calculating effect sizes (e. g., Cohen's d for group differences) and comparing observed changes to established minimal clinically important differences (MCID) for VAS scores and QoL measures.

Hypothetical Results and Data Presentation:

Based on the proposed mechanisms and preliminary evidence, we anticipate that the PFMT group will demonstrate superior outcomes compared to the control group.

Table 1: Baseline Characteristics of Participants (Illustrative Date)

Characteristic	PFMT Group (n=80)	Control Group (n=80)	P-value
Age (years, Mean ± SD)	22.1 ± 2.5	21.8 ± 2.3	0.45
BMI (kg/m^2 , Mean ± SD)	23.5 ± 2.1	23.2 ± 2.0	0.32
Menarche Age (years, Mean ± SD)	13.0 ± 1.1	13.1 ± 1.0	0.60
Duration of PD (years, Mean ± SD)	5.5 ± 1.8	5.3 ± 1.7	0.71
Baseline VAS (Mean ± SD)	7.1 ± 1.0	7.2 ± 0.9	0.58

(Note: P-values > 0.05 would indicate no significant differences at baseline, confirming successful randomization.)

Figure 1: Mean VAS Pain Scores Over Time by Group (Illustrative Data)

Outcome Measure	Group	T0 (Mean ± SD)	T1 (Mean ± SD)	T2 (Mean ± SD)	F (Time x Group)	P-value
VAS Pain (0-10)	PFMT	7.1 ± 1.0	4.2 ± 1.1	3.8 ± 1.0	18.75	<0.001
	Control	7.2 ± 0.9	7.0 ± 1.0	7.1 ± 0.9		
Pain Duration (days)	PFMT	4.6 ± 0.8	2.5 ± 0.7	2.3 ± 0.6	11.23	<0.001
	Control	4.5 ± 0.8	4.4 ± 0.8	4.3 ± 0.7		
Analgesic Use (tablets/cycle)	PFMT	3.9 ± 1.2	1.1 ± 0.8	0.8 ± 0.6	15.67	<0.001
	Control	3.7 ± 1.1	3.6 ± 1.1	3.5 ± 1.0		
SF-36 Physical Component Score	PFMT	55.0 ± 7.5	68.5 ± 6.8	70.2 ± 6.5	9.88	<0.01
	Control	56.2 ± 7.8	57.0 ± 7.6	57.5 ± 7.7		
MDQ Total Score (Lower is better)	PFMT	65.0 ± 10.0	35.0 ± 8.0	30.0 ± 7.5	13.45	<0.001
	Control	64.5 ± 9.8	63.0 ± 9.5	62.5 ± 9.0		
PFMS (MOS 0-5)	PFMT	2.5 ± 0.5	3.9 ± 0.6	4.1 ± 0.5	20.10	<0.001
	Control	2.6 ± 0.5	2.7 ± 0.5	2.6 ± 0.5		
PFME (seconds)	PFMT	15.0 ± 3.0	30.0 ± 5.0	32.0 ± 4.5	17.55	<0.001
	Control	14.5 ± 2.8	15.0 ± 2.9	14.8 ± 2.7		

(Note: The p-values in this illustrative table are for the interaction effect (Group x Time), indicating that the change over time is significantly different between the PFMT and control groups.)

4. Limitations of the Study

While meticulously designed, this study has inherent limitations that warrant consideration:

Single-Blinding: Complete blinding of participants is challenging in exercise-based interventions, as participants are aware of their activities. While outcome assessors and data analysts will be blinded, the potential for performance bias from the unblinded physiotherapist, or placebo effects in the intervention group, cannot be entirely eliminated.

Subjectivity of Pain Measurement: The Visual Analog Scale (VAS) is a subjective measure of pain. Although widely used and validated, individual pain perception can vary. The inclusion of objective measures like analgesic use and objective pelvic floor muscle assessments helps mitigate this.

Adherence to Home Exercises: Monitoring participant adherence to the prescribed home exercise program can be difficult. While log sheets and regular check-ins will be implemented, actual compliance may vary, potentially affecting the true impact of the intervention.

Generalizability: The study population will be young women (18-30 years) with primary dysmenorrhea in a specific geographic region (Maharashtra). The findings may not be directly generalizable to women of different age groups, cultural backgrounds, or those with secondary dysmenorrhea.

Absence of a Sham PFMT Group: Creating a credible "sham" PFMT intervention is complex, as even minimal physical contact or attention might elicit non-specific effects. Therefore, the control group receiving general health education serves as a pragmatic comparator.

Potential Confounding Factors: Lifestyle factors such as diet, stress levels, sleep patterns, and other non-study physical activities are difficult to control completely and could potentially influence dysmenorrhea symptoms.⁴

Long-term Efficacy: While the study includes a 3-month post-intervention follow-up, longer-term follow-up (e. g., 12 months or more) would provide more definitive insights into the sustained benefits and long-term adherence to PFMT for dysmenorrhea management.

5. Conclusion

This randomized controlled trial is meticulously designed to investigate the efficacy of a structured pelvic floor muscle training program as a non-pharmacological physiotherapy rehabilitation strategy for women suffering from primary dysmenorrhea. By evaluating its impact on key pain parameters, analgesic reliance, and overall quality of life, the study aims to generate high-quality evidence that can support the integration of PFMT into standard clinical practice for PD management. If the hypothesized significant improvements are observed, PFMT could represent a safe, accessible, and empowering intervention for millions of women worldwide, offering a valuable alternative or complement to existing pharmacological treatments and significantly enhancing their well-being. The findings of this research will contribute

meaningfully to the evolving understanding of comprehensive women's health physiotherapy.

Ethical Approval: Approved

Acknowledgement: None

Source of Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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