

# INNER STRENGTH

HOW HARDCORE IS YOUR PELVIC FLOOR? NICK McGRATH MEETS THE WOMAN WHO WANTS YOU TO LIFT WEIGHTS WITH YOUR WHATSIT



Our culture considers it more normal for women to have rampant urinary incontinence and prolapsed pelvic organs than for them to be able to shoot ping-pong balls from their vagina." So says Kim Anami, a self-taught intimacy coach, 44-year-old mother of one and "vaginal kung-fu" master who has spent the past two decades studying tantra, meditation and herbal medicine.

"People read about women in Thailand firing darts from their vaginas and they might think, 'Oh my God, that's so freaky,' but I don't think it's freaky at all. I believe that's normal baseline capability for every healthy vagina, and the benefits can be dramatic and life changing."

Anami believes women could significantly improve their gynaecological, psychological and sexual health via a few simple exercises involving nothing more than a jade egg placed into the vagina attached to a selection of incrementally heavier objects. And she is not alone.

The American gynaecologist Arnold Kegel, who invented the original perineometer to measure the strength of voluntary pelvic-floor muscle contractions, would have applauded Anami's quest for pelvic perfection. But what he would have made of the numerous digital innovations from today's vaginal evangelists (and Silicon Valley geeks hoping to exploit a new kind of wearable-tech trend) is hard to imagine.

The Elvie exercise tracker looks like a cross between a tube of executive mints and an asthma inhaler. It uses an app to measure pelvic strength, while its rival the kGoal promises "real-time tactile biofeedback". It resembles a rubberised cactus minus the spikes. The Skea (Smart Kegel Exercise Aid) — which was launched thanks to crowdfunding on Kickstarter — resembles a miniature fuchsia swan and aims to bring fun to pelvic exercises using smartphone games to help users train their muscles.

On Instagram, @crazyjewishmom has half a million followers who read about the travails of the 26-year-old New Yorker Kate Siegel as her mum tries to persuade her to embrace the power of the Kegel ball ("U don't want it to sag when you have kids," she barks). And yoga gurus have long been extolling the virtues of strengthening your mula bandha — pelvic-floor muscles.

Surprisingly, possessing a vagina isn't a prerequisite for reaping the benefits of improved pelvic vigour. The urologist and author Dr Andrew L Siegel, currently marketing his Private Gym — a "weightlifting" course for penises — argues that Kegel exercises not only improve men's sex lives, but also prevent incontinence.

Popular culture is starting to take notice. On a recent episode of the HBO and Sky Atlantic hit series Silicon Valley, the start-up mega-geek Jared started doing Kegels and sent Twitter into meltdown.



**LADY LIFTING**  
Kim Anami shows off her vaginal weightlifting skills

Despite growing enthusiasm, resistance among the general population persists. "Because women aren't exercising their vaginas, all these other really catastrophic events are taking place, such as uterine removal," says Anami. "Things that are life changing and dramatic, when all you need to do is exercise your vagina a little bit." Anami runs sexual-health seminars and retreats from beaches, villas and yachts in LA, Bali and Vancouver, as well as online tutorials for thousands of clients worldwide. "Fifty per cent of women experience some kind of pelvic prolapse after childbirth," she says. "Part of their anatomy is falling out, and the reason for that is, primarily, a lack of vaginal exercise."

For Tania Boler, the CEO and co-founder of Chiaro, the company that makes the Elvie, the inspiration to develop her product came when she was told to do pelvic-floor exercises after giving birth. "I struggled to know if I was doing them right and if they were making a difference," she says. "As I researched the area, I realised that there hasn't been much innovation at all. Women were buying all types of devices, but there wasn't any evidence that they worked. The one thing shown to work is real-time biofeedback, but until now this technology has only existed in hospitals. Most women have quite low awareness of their pelvic-floor muscles, so exercising all the time can feel a bit pointless. It's like trying to lose weight without weighing scales: you won't know if you have improved."

According to Boler, we Brits have lagged behind women in France, Germany and America when it comes to pelvic-floor exercise. "Awareness

is rising, and so there is more open demand for exercise apps and trackers," she says. "There is a growing trend for people to track all aspects of their physical activity and wellbeing, and the pelvic-floor muscles are just like any other part of the body."

To draw attention to her own crusade, Anami has launched an Instagram campaign called #thingsiliftwithmyvagina. She has posted a mind-boggling array of photographs of her in exotic locations lifting geographically indigenous objects using only the strength of her vaginal muscles. Among the eye-catching shots are images of her hoisting a surfboard on Venice Beach, lifting weights with muscle men in LA, raising a green coconut in Bali and even elevating a bunch of bananas in Ubud.

A cursory search for Kegel shows that Twitter is emphatically embracing Anami's assertion that this kind of workout is a panacea for a wide range of health issues. "I had a woman who had issues of urinary incontinence for 20 years. Within one week of doing the egg practice, she had eliminated her urinary incontinence. I've had menopausal

women be able to get their lubrication back without the use of hormones. [Post-menopausal women] do not have circulation in the vagina because it is weak and atrophied. As soon as you strengthen it, you increase the circulation and boom! I've also had women have easier menstrual periods,

less cramping and reductions of their PMS symptoms. I've had women who have had orgasms for the first time after doing this practice."

Anami, who is a firm believer in a holistic approach to health, is also adamantly against cosmetic surgery and is alarmed by the rise in vaginal surgical procedures, claiming they can cause irreparable damage. "You can't go into such a sensitive area and hack it up and expect it to perform well afterwards. With all that scar tissue created during the surgery, most of those women who have cosmetic vaginal procedures will probably not have an orgasm again."

For Anami, naturally enhanced vaginal health is of paramount importance: "From a personal perspective, I will keep lifting things with my vagina. There is always more to learn." ♦

## THE BOX How to become Mrs Muscle

**Lift off** Kim Anami uses a simple jade egg (below) and string for exercises. From £25; yonihealer.co.uk

**Power up** The Elvie uses an app to measure your pelvic-floor strength. £109; elvie.com

**Feel the burn** The kGoal (bottom) gives you tactile feedback when you get the exercises right. £97; minnalife.com

**Game on** The Skea has been successfully funded on Kickstarter. It adds a gaming element to your Kegels to keep you interested

