

— INSPIRE

by Louise Atkinson

WHEN you meet a woman in her 40s who looks much younger than her age, it is only natural to want to know the secret to her youthful glow.

You might expect to hear about an expensive moisturiser, a few cosmetic tweaks, even a toyboy lover. What you don't imagine is that it's all down to having a killer pelvic floor.

'People tell me I look 20 years younger than other women my age, and I'm absolutely convinced that's thanks to the time I spend focusing on my pelvic floor,' says 43-year-old Coco Berlin, who's just written a hit book about it.

'I find it quite amusing that people assume I have a face full of Botox. I'd never touch it!'

Coco grew up in Germany and has had the sort of action-packed life that makes the rest of us feel like homely dullards.

Before discovering her passion for intimate exercise, she had a career as an architect, but abandoned that to work as a belly dancer instead, complete with highly toned abs and glutes and, ahem, levator ani, or pelvic floor musculature.

Her book, which has a rather rude name, has been a runaway bestseller in Europe, where women are more used to discussing the function, and dysfunction, of the pelvic floor, especially after giving birth.

In the UK, by contrast, if you're not entirely sure what a pelvic floor is and think it sounds like something you might have fitted in your hallway, you're not alone.

Research shows that while a third of all women will experience a pelvic-floor problem at some point in their lives, many have no idea what it is.

Quite simply, it's the hammock of muscles inside the pelvis which is designed to support the organs there. Like all muscles, they weaken with age, and this is exacerbated by childbirth, menopause, obesity and our sedentary lifestyles.

TROUBLINGLY, even if you think yours is working well, the generalised tissue thinning and muscle wastage that occurs as part of menopause in midlife can weaken it. The result is those embarrassing leaks when you cough, sneeze or jump.

What's most fascinating about Coco is her holistic and forthright approach, combined with cutting-edge scientific research. Indeed, she reckons those of us who are doing pelvic floor exercises are actually doing them all wrong.

Forget the half-baked advice we're normally given about squeezing vaginal muscles while boiling a kettle, waiting for a bus or brushing our teeth.

Her methods involve breathing techniques, mindfulness and deep relaxation, and are based on the understanding that the pelvic floor plays a greater role in female health and wellbeing than we've hitherto realised.

Working internal muscles may sound like another tedious thing to add to our 'to do' lists, but if it could knock years off your appearance (not to mention make you something of a goddess between the sheets) then it has to be worth a try...

USE THE MIND TO BUST DAILY STRESS

COCO'S exercises are about relaxing, softening and freeing the rigid joints of the pelvis so it can become more mobile, and honing communication between that part of the body and the brain. The knock-on effects, she says, are surprisingly far reaching and powerful. 'These exercises offer deep levels of relaxation which calms the nervous system,' she says. 'Stress weakens your pelvic floor, but these moves boost your resilience to stress.'

'When the nervous system is calm you feel centred, and your body is better able to adjust, detox and repair. You'll sleep better and feel well-rested.' That's why her

innovative methods encourage a strong mind-body connection using visualisation to help you to fully feel, activate and relax every aspect of your pelvic floor. 'Only when you get to know your pelvic floor in its entirety and activate it dynamically, instead of just tightening it up with the wrong exercises, can you take advantage of its full power.'

Not that it's a quick fix. Coco's most popular workshop lasts four-and-a-half hours, which sounds exhausting, though it's much more about mindfulness than exertion. She maintains her pupils leave each session feeling rejuvenated and looking like they've just been on holiday.

UNLOCK YOUR ANTI-AGEING HORMONES

COCO is convinced her finely tuned pelvic floor is behind her youthful looks. But how can unseen muscles in your pelvis possibly achieve that?

In fact, the pelvic floor is a rather more complex piece of anatomy than we'd previously thought, she says.

Scientists are only now beginning to understand the full role played by connective tissue called the fascia, which flows around all the organs in the pelvis, and works with the pelvic floor muscles to hold everything in place. Many believe it also acts as a communication channel linking to the nervous system and the brain.

By working to relax and strengthen these tissues, we can unlock trapped channels, allowing for a healthier flow of the hormones and feel-good endorphins that help us look and feel young, says Coco.

'Many of us have become disconnected from that part of the body, but its fitness and integration have a direct impact on the overall health and alignment of your entire body.'

BOOST SEX DRIVE WITH RELAXATION

IT WAS Coco's desire to be a brilliant belly dancer that

piqued her interest in the pelvic floor 15 years ago. She discovered the best dancers in the world were those who developed a deep mental and physical connection with their pelvis and pelvic floor.

'It's not a question of how hard you can squeeze the muscles. It's about getting movement and energy into the whole pelvic area,' she says.

'Sensuous awareness' is the only way to find and train the pelvic floor effectively, claims Coco.

On a physical level, strengthening it means the female organs and the bladder get a natural lift, ensuring good circulation, which she believes is crucial for better sex and satisfying orgasms, too.

'A loose or tense pelvic floor pulls the pelvic bones out of balance, which in turn leads to poor posture,' she says.

'As a result, internal organs can slide downwards, and important nerves can end up being pinched, which means they can no longer transmit sexy sensations to your brain.'

She claims her programme reverses that problem, leaving you far more in tune with your natural libido.

'An activated pelvic floor stimulates the nerves in your entire pelvic area, making you more sensitive and orgasmic,' she says.

'You'll be amazed at how your



Sensual: Coco Berlin

She's a 43-year-old belly dancer. Now, in a smash hit new book, Coco Berlin describes...

The sexy secret to looking this good in midlife (No diet required!)

erotic sensitivity increases a thousandfold when all your nerve endings can communicate with your brain unhindered.'

This is clearly very good news — for her husband, too — and perhaps explains the success of

her 25-year relationship. She and her husband have been together since the age of 18.

Scientific research shows a satisfying love life can make women feel more sure of themselves, more creative, and

more courageous. But even outside the bedroom, she says, developing a stronger connection to your body can help to transform your self-image and boost confidence.

Whatever physical or

psychological mechanisms at play, Coco Berlin is clearly the modern poster-girl for the pelvic floor — and there's something very beguiling about an exercise plan that requires relaxation rather than effort.

READY, STEADY, SQUEEZE

COCO BERLIN recommends aiming to 'connect' with your pelvic floor in some form, no matter how briefly, every day. She has devised a sequence of exercises which can be done sitting, lying down or standing, quickly in a few minutes, or extensively over an hour or so. Try these for starters:

Pelvic-floor breathing

CLOSE your eyes and relax. Breathe steadily and deeply and notice whether your pelvic floor moves when you breathe. Feel how it expands as you inhale and relaxes as you exhale. Imagine it sinking to the floor as you breathe out.

Focus on your bones

● IMAGINE that your pubic bones are pulling up towards your belly button (but don't actually move).

● NOW imagine your tailbone is pulling down to the ground.

● SPEND five minutes just focusing on this subtle transfer of tension.

Easy chair exercise

● SIT on the edge of a chair, feet hip-width apart and flat on the ground. Feel your sit bones and let them drop deeply into the chair. Align your spine by imagining every single vertebra in a tall column with your head on top, floating up to the ceiling.

● NOW push your right foot into the ground until you feel the pressure rise to your knee and up to your pelvic floor.

● LET go and change sides, very slowly alternating between the two. Observe how the exercise affects the rest of your body.

● PUSH both feet into the ground. You should notice your pelvic floor gently activates and both your sit bones come together. When you're doing this correctly you should notice your hips widening at the back and the triggering of your lower abdominal muscles.

Wagging your tail

● LIE on your back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor. Relax.

● IMAGINE the end of your spine curling up to the ceiling and feel how this builds up tension in the pelvic floor.

● NOW imagine your tailbone is a mighty tail and move it from left to right. Relax and feel the effect on your body.

● THINK of your tail being rolled up like a chameleon's tail, and let it slowly unroll towards the earth until it lengthens on the ground. It will contract again by itself. Next, let it stretch on the ground again. Relax everything.

● DRAW small circles with the tip of your tail. Make them bigger, then smaller. Change direction. After a few minutes consciously let everything go.

■ EXERCISES adapted from P***y Yoga: Pelvic Floor Training For Radiance, Confidence And A Fulfilling Love Life by Coco Berlin (£25.99, Aleksandra Kettelhoit-Lohmann), which is out now.

GIVE YOUR PELVIC FLOOR SOME HI-TECH HELP

MAKE IT A GAME
Elvie pelvic floor trainer, £169, amazon.co.uk

A SMALL egg-shaped device transmits information about motion and pressure via Bluetooth to a phone app as you perform pelvic floor exercises. The app tells you whether you're doing the exercises correctly and

encourages you to play games designed to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles, with challenges to beat your top score.

VERDICT: Great for competitive types, but works a limited range of muscles.

PHYSIO'S PICK
Kegel8 ultra 20 V2 electronic pelvic toner, £159.99, kegel8.co.uk

FROM the market leaders in electronic toners, this nifty little machine consists of a handset attached by wire to a probe, and offers 20 different programmes designed to target bladder weakness and prolapse, or tighten the pelvic floor for better sex.

VERDICT: Many women are evangelical about the Kegel8. This is recommended by physiotherapists for those struggling to identify the correct muscles.

NHS APPROVED
Squeezy app, £2.99, the App Store

DOWNLOAD to your phone, set alerts and the app will remind you to do your pelvic floor exercises, give instructions, count for you and even offer motivational messages.

VERDICT: NHS approved. A useful motivator if you know what you should be doing.

NEAT SHORTS
Innovo shorts, £249, myinnovo.com

HI-TECH cycling shorts with embedded pads attached to wires which plug into a handset and send pulses of electrical stimulation to instigate pelvic floor contractions.

VERDICT: Generates a squeezing, tightening and lifting sensation. A useful way to stimulate a broad

spread of muscles throughout the pelvis.

BASIC BUY
Neen pelvic educator, £13.99, stressnomore.co.uk

A SMALL plastic probe attached to a stick, which moves up and down as you squeeze, this is a low-tech way to do Kegels.

VERDICT: Inexpensive starter option, but it's hard to make the stick move.