
URINARY INCONTINENCE

Embarrassing but treatable

What is urinary incontinence?

Urinary incontinence means that you can't always control when you urinate ("pee"). As a result, you wet your pants. This can be embarrassing. But it can be treated.

Several million adults in North America have urinary incontinence. It's most common in women over 50 years old. But it can also affect younger people, especially women who have just given birth.

Be sure to talk to your doctor if you have this problem. If you hide your incontinence, you risk getting rashes, sores, and skin and urinary tract (bladder) infections. Also, you may find yourself avoiding friends and family because of fears about your urine leaking and creating a scene. This can be avoided.

What causes incontinence?

Half of the time, urinary incontinence is caused by a medical condition other than a bladder problem. At other times, it may be caused by weak pelvic muscles or other things. (See list of causes. There are three types of urinary incontinence:

Stress incontinence is when urine leaks because of sudden pressure on your lower stomach muscles, such as when you cough, sneeze, laugh, rise from a chair, lift something or exercise. Stress incontinence usually occurs when the pelvic muscles are weak, sometimes by vaginal birth, or by prostate or other surgery. Stress incontinence is common in women.

Urge incontinence is when the need to urinate comes on too fast - before you can get to a toilet. Your body may only give you a warning of a few seconds to minutes before you urinate. Urge incontinence is most common in the elderly and may be a sign of an infection in your kidneys or bladder.

Overflow incontinence is when you have a constant dribbling of urine. It's caused by an overfull bladder. You may feel like you can't empty your bladder all the way and you may strain when urinating. This often occurs in men and can be caused by something blocking the flow, such as an enlarged prostate gland or tumor. Diabetes or certain medicines may also cause the problem.

Causes of urinary incontinence

in your vagina or urethra (the tiny tube that empties the bladder when you urinate), mostly after menopause (the change of life)

- For men, a prostate gland that partially blocks the exit from the bladder (is too big) or after prostate surgery
- Weakened pelvic muscles
- Certain medicines
- Being confused or unsure of where you are
- Build-up of stool in your bowels (constipation)
- Not being able to move around
- Urinary tract (bladder) infection
- Medical problems such as diabetes

How can it be treated?

If your urinary incontinence is caused by something that can be treated, the incontinence will go away when the cause is treated. Simple treatments often work so talk to your doctor.

Incontinence can also be treated with special exercises, called **Kegel exercises**. These exercises help strengthen the muscles that control the bladder and can be done anywhere, any time. You won't see a big difference for about three to six months after starting the exercises.

Women may have a better sexual response as a result of these exercises. Although designed for women, the Kegel exercises can also help men.

You can also **train your bladder**. Start by urinating at set intervals, such as every 30 minutes to two hours-whether you feel the need to go or not. Then gradually lengthen the time between when you urinate - say by 30 minutes - until you're urinating every three or four hours.

You can practice relaxation when you feel the urge to urinate before your time is up. Breathe slowly and deeply. Think about your breathing until the urge goes away. You can also do Kegel exercises if they help control your urge.

After the urge passes, wait five minutes and then go to the bathroom even if you don't feel you need to go. If you don't go, you might not be able to control your next urge. When it's easy to wait five minutes after an urge, begin waiting 10 minutes. Bladder training may take three to 12 weeks.

Kegel exercises

slowing your urine flow without using your stomach, leg or buttock muscles. Another method is to pretend as if you're trying not to pass gas. When you're able to slow or stop the stream of urine, you've located the right muscle.

- Squeeze these muscles. Hold for a count of 10. Relax for a count of 10.
 - Do this 25 times, five to six times a day.
 - You may need to start slower, perhaps squeezing and relaxing muscles for four seconds each and doing this 10 times a set
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Losing weight if you're heavy may also help.

Biofeedback has also been used to treat incontinence. Biofeedback uses complex machines that give pictures and sounds to show how well you are controlling your pelvic muscles.

Will medicine or surgery help?

Sometimes medicine helps some types of urinary incontinence. For example, estrogen cream to put in the vagina can be helpful after menopause for some women who have mild stress incontinence.

Several different kinds of surgery may be useful. Surgery is usually done to treat urinary incontinence only after other things haven't worked or if the incontinence is severe.

Notes:



This brochure provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this brochure applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

This health education material has been favorably reviewed by the Patient Education Review Committee of the College of Family Physicians of Canada.



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The College of Family Physicians of Canada, one of the nation's largest medical specialty groups, is committed to promoting and maintaining high standards for family doctors – the doctors who give ongoing, comprehensive care to people of all ages.

This patient education brochure was developed by The College of Family Physicians of Canada in cooperation with the American Academy of Family Physicians.



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