

Urinary Incontinence

Urinary incontinence, sometimes called overactive bladder, is the loss of bladder control. Incontinence affects twice as many women as men. Pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause may make urinary incontinence more likely. Urinary incontinence is not a normal part of aging, and it can be treated.

Q: What are the types of urinary incontinence that affect women?

A: The two most common types of urinary incontinence in women are:

- **Stress incontinence.** Stress incontinence can happen when weak pelvic floor muscles put pressure on the bladder and urethra by making them work harder. With stress incontinence, everyday actions that use the pelvic floor muscles, such as coughing, sneezing, laughing, or physical activity, can cause you to leak urine.
- **Urge incontinence.** With urge incontinence, urine leakage usually happens after a strong, sudden urge to urinate and before you can get to a bathroom. Some women with urge incontinence are able to get to a bathroom in time but feel the urge to urinate more than eight times a day. They also do not urinate much once they get to the bathroom. Urge incontinence is more common in older women.

Q: Why does urinary incontinence affect more women than men?

A: Pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause may affect the urinary tract and the surrounding muscles. The pelvic floor muscles that support the bladder, urethra, uterus (womb), and bowels may become weaker or damaged. When the muscles that support the urinary tract are weak, the muscles in the urinary tract must work harder to hold urine until you are ready to urinate.

This extra stress or pressure on the bladder and urethra can cause urinary incontinence or leakage.

The female urethra is also shorter than the male urethra. Any weakness or damage to the urethra in a woman is more likely to cause urinary incontinence. This is because there is less muscle keeping the urine in until you are ready to urinate.

Q: What causes urinary incontinence?

A: Other than pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause, causes of urinary incontinence include:

- **Overweight.** Having overweight puts pressure on the bladder, which can weaken the muscles over time.
- **Constipation.** Constipation, or straining to have a bowel movement, can put stress or pressure on the bladder and pelvic floor muscles.
- **Nerve damage.** Damaged nerves may send signals to the bladder at the wrong time or not at all. Childbirth and health problems such as diabetes and multiple sclerosis can cause nerve damage in the bladder, urethra, or pelvic floor muscles.
- **Surgery.** Any surgery that involves a woman's reproductive organs, such as a hysterectomy, can damage the supporting pelvic floor muscles, especially if the uterus is removed.
- **Certain medicines.** Urinary incontinence may be a side effect of medicines such as diuretics ("water pills" used to treat heart failure, liver cirrhosis, hypertension, and certain kidney diseases). The incontinence often goes away when you stop taking the medicine.

- **Caffeine.** Drinks with caffeine can cause the bladder to fill quickly, which can cause you to leak urine. Limiting caffeine may help with incontinence, because there is less strain on your bladder.
- **Infection.** Urinary tract infections and bladder infections may cause incontinence for a short time. Bladder control often returns when the infection goes away.

Q: What steps can I take at home to treat urinary incontinence?

A: You and your doctor or nurse will work together to create a treatment plan. Be patient as you work with your doctor or nurse on a treatment plan. It may take a month or longer for different treatments to begin working. You may start with steps you can take at home, including:

- **Doing Kegel exercises.** If you have stress incontinence, Kegel exercises to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles may help.
- **Training your bladder.** You can help control overactive bladder or urge incontinence by going to the bathroom at set times. By gradually increasing the amount of time between visits, your bladder learns to hold more urine before it signals the need to go again.
- **Losing weight.** Extra weight puts more pressure on your bladder and nearby muscles, which can lead to problems with bladder control.
- **Changing your eating habits.** Drinks with caffeine, carbonation (such as sodas), or alcohol may make bladder leakage or urinary incontinence worse.
- **Quitting smoking.** Smoking can make many health problems, including urinary incontinence, worse.
- **Treating constipation.** Constipation can make urinary incontinence worse. Eating foods with a lot of fiber can make you less constipated.

You can also buy pads or protective underwear while you take other steps to treat urinary incontinence.

For more information...

For more information about urinary incontinence, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Institute on Aging, NIH, HHS
1-800-222-2225 • www.nia.nih.gov

National Kidney and Urologic Diseases Information Clearinghouse, NIDDK, NIH, HHS
301-496-3583 • www.niddk.nih.gov

American Urogynecologic Society
202-367-1167 • www.augs.org

National Association for Continence
1-800-BLADDER (252-3337) • www.nafc.org

Urology Care Foundation
410-689-3998 • www.urologyhealth.org

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